

# CENTRING

why mindfulness alone isn't enough



*Mark Walsh*

# Centring

Why mindfulness alone isn't enough.

**The definitive guide to managing stress with the body, for trainers, coaches and facilitators.**

*by Mark Walsh and other members of the Embodied Facilitator Course community.*

“We are the first system we must learn to manage” – Stuart Heller

“If you want to help someone, get yourself together” – Wendy Palmer

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## Acknowledgements

*This book is strongly influenced by various embodiment teachers, particularly Paul Linden of Columbus, USA. I have also tried to credit other individual teachers where I have mentioned their techniques explicitly. Also, in twenty years of studying this content, with similar techniques being invented independently, and with many teachers cross-fertilising, it's sometimes not clear in my own mind where things came from, so I'd like to apologise if I missed you out! Ultimately, embodiment is universal and I've never been a fan of trying to trademark being human, but different teachers have worked out different pieces of the puzzle and have their own signature moves, and I would like to bow in their direction.*

*I'd particularly like to thank the Embodied Facilitator Course community (<http://embodiedfacilitator.com/>) who have helped me develop my understanding of centring through years of teaching, experimentation and practical application. This is a dynamic international group, who are all graduates of the EFC course, and then have gone on to work with centring in many ways in the world before feeding-back. Their discoveries have been invaluable. My colleague Francis Briers has been particularly helpful, he co-founded EFC and helped me work out much of the content in this book over the years, as well as in co-writing early drafts of this book. Thank you all.*

**Mark Walsh, November 2017, Brighton UK**



**Why would anyone be interested in centring?** Well, you could look at it in this way: what if there were a piece of technology available which could improve literally anything you do? What if it were free, took very little time to learn, measurably improved performance across a huge range of tasks, reduced stress, and improved both individual wellbeing, performance and relationships? What if there were something always available and good for your health that could improve every aspect of life? Happily, such "technology" does exist - it's a set of body-mind techniques known as "centring".

We all need to manage ourselves. This book is about how to do that more effectively. It is especially aimed at facilitators, trainers and coaches of all kinds who also wish to support others in managing themselves too. Martial arts, dance and yoga teachers will also find it helpful for supporting students as well.

#### **WHAT YOU'LL GET FROM THIS BOOK:**

- Practical techniques to improve your own happiness, relationships and productivity.
- Tools to enhance your facilitation skills.
- A thorough grounding in the deeper principles behind techniques so you can work creatively with them.
- Practical techniques you can bring to clients right away to add value to your offers.
- Clarification of the often woolly theory of centring.
- The science of centring to better "sell" the idea to clients.



# Introduction

We can all regulate ourselves at times, we're not toddlers having tantrums at any mishap, but this vital life skill can be more or less developed. There's much benefit to simply being aware of ourselves (mindfulness), but much more in being able to positively influence our state, to impact our happiness, relationships and work. "Centring"<sup>1</sup> is the overall term used for the self-regulation skills that work with the body. At core, being stressed is a bodily response, so we need bodily tools to work with this. We cannot just talk ourselves out of physiology, and all of the disembodied books in the world won't help either.

I first learnt this skill in the martial arts over twenty years ago and for the last ten years have been teaching it to business leaders in boardrooms, humanitarians in war zones, and to trainers and coaches in over 25 countries. For facilitators like myself, self-regulation is a key professional skill. It enables me to do my best work, especially when faced with the inevitable challenges of the job. More generally centring is a life skill that anyone who has any kind of stress can benefit from! I'd argue that in the modern world centring skills are *vital* for our sanity, productivity and family life! This book will outline what centring is and the biology behind it, and give detailed instruction in centring techniques and its underlying principles. It will be useful for anyone, but is particularly designed for my fellow facilitators, coaches and movement teachers. This guide is the most comprehensive written guide to centring, drawing from a wealth of sources to offer a new level of depth, breadth, clarity and pragmatism on the subject.

## **WHAT IS CENTRING ANYWAY?**

"Centring" can refer to specific techniques that involve focusing attention on the centre of gravity of the body to bring us into a specific state, but I use the term here more generally to mean any body-mind techniques used for self-regulation that bring us back into holistic balance. Centring to me means techniques which create a positive foundational state from which any further action can be engaged in with greater awareness and choice. Often, these techniques involve reducing arousal levels and the famous "fight or flight" reaction as this is often helpful in a stressful world (which I could call down-regulation); but centring also includes techniques for regulating ourselves to greater alertness and stimulation (up-regulation), and techniques for shifting state without reference to arousal level. More on

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<sup>1</sup> also spelt "centering" in the USA

flight, flight and related terms later. Creating any desired change to your state could also be called "centring" in a very extended sense though, and I don't use it quite as broadly. More colloquially, centring is about getting your shit together! Sometimes I'll introduce centring by asking people to compare how different they are on their best days and their worst days - a very different way of being for most! I'll then suggest that centring can be thought of as a way to have more good days and less bad days!



In models of embodied types and preferences (e.g. four elements or yin and yang<sup>2</sup>) "centre" can be seen as the balanced midpoint. From this midpoint we can respond skilfully. It can be viewed both as a physical place - a person's literal physical centre of gravity just below their belly-button in the middle of their body if they are standing upright (perhaps surprisingly low to those from Western "uptight" cultures). In traditional oriental systems it is known as the "hara" (Japanese) or "dan tien" (Chinese) and is important for many martial, meditative and health disciplines. The term is also used more metaphorically in some body-mind disciplines and as mentioned here covers state management and self-regulation generally to a functional midpoint. It involves ways to alter how you feel, what you are capable of, and what types of relationships you are predisposed towards ("I", "it" and "we" aspects). Centring involves methods, and creates results, that are subjective, objective and intersubjective, involving the body-mind, behaviour and relationships.

Master centring teacher, Paul Linden gives one excellent definition of centring here:

*"Centering is the antidote to the distress response. It is possible to prevent or overcome contraction by deliberately placing the body in a state of freedom, balance, and expansiveness. Contrary to our customary ways of being, action is much more efficient and effective when the body is relaxed, free and expansive. Every activity, whether it is primarily physical, intellectual, emotional, or spiritual will be done with greater ease and efficacy when the body is open."*

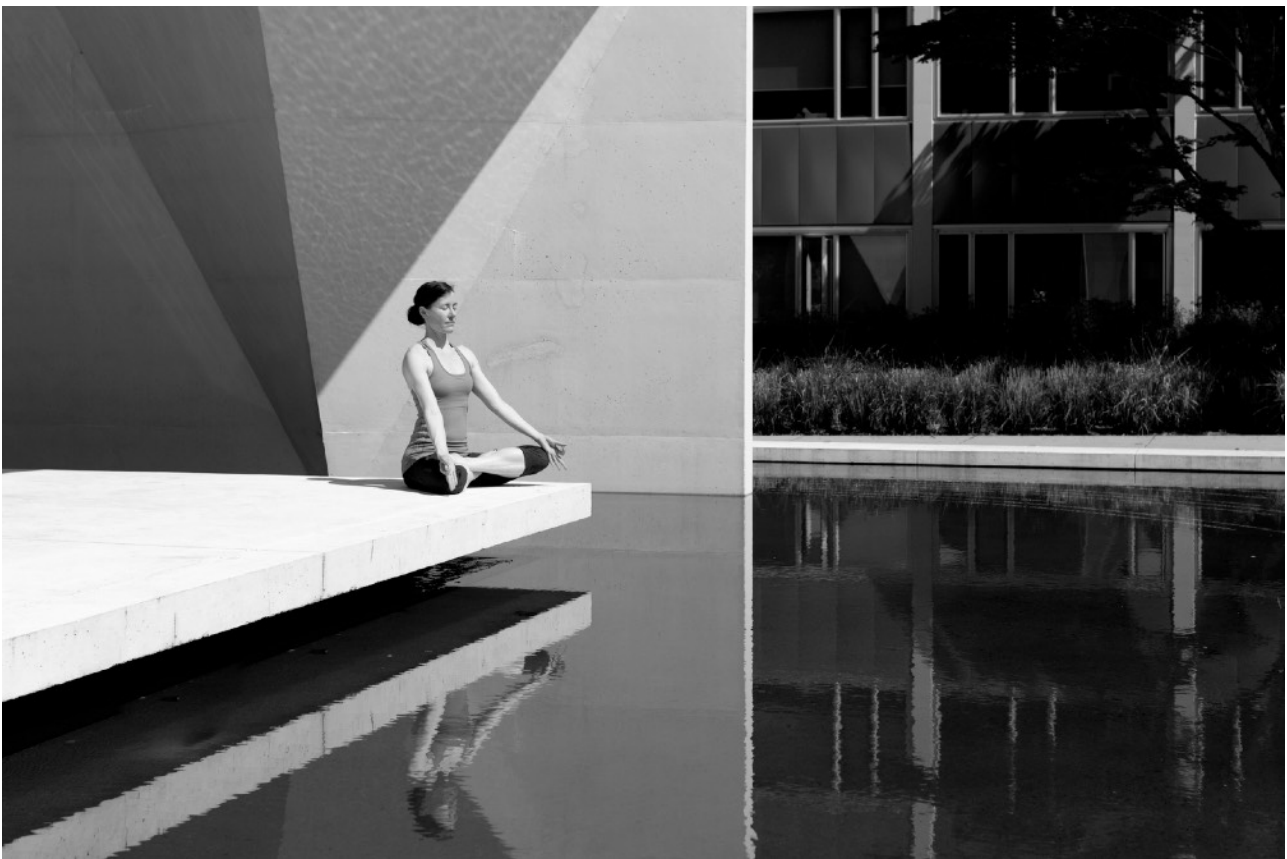
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<sup>2</sup> 4 elements and yin and yang are two quite widespread embodied systems. For those familiar with them I'll make passing references in the book. If they're not in your vocabulary don't worry about those notes, they're not essential.



*The centered state is a state of wholeness and integrity. It can be described in different ways. Speaking in structural language, the state of integrity is one in which the musculoskeletal system is balanced and free of strain. Speaking functionally, this state allows stable, mobile and balanced movement. Speaking in psychological terms, this state involves reaching out into the world with a symmetrical, expansive awareness and intentionality, while simultaneously staying anchored in internal body awareness. Speaking in spiritual terms, this state is an integration of the body states of power and love. Speaking in ethical terms, this state creates an awareness of and concern for the effects of one's actions on the wellbeing of others. Whatever terms we choose to use, they refer to one and the same mind-body state.*

*For some reason, it is easy and automatic for human beings to drop into the distress response, but centering needs to be learned and practiced, and it needs to be engaged in voluntarily and deliberately. The key to centering lies in developing and applying body awareness."*



### **Reflection exercise - good and bad days?**

What is the difference in you between your best and worst days - by your own values and definition? Or good and bad moments within a day if you prefer.



When have you been most “centred” and how would you describe this?  
What was the difference between those good and bad days, not externally in terms of events but:

In terms of your awareness?

Your physiology?

Your breathing, posture and muscle tone specifically?

Your behaviour?

Your happiness?

Your relationships?

Your task effectiveness?

How are these aspects linked? This is what we shall be exploring in this book.

### **Reflection exercise - why centre?**

At what times and in what circumstances might being better able to manage your state be useful to you? Be specific. What relationships may be improved by centring (for example less conflict or more authenticity)? Where might it make you happier? Where for you as a facilitator may centring be useful? Ask a loved one this too!

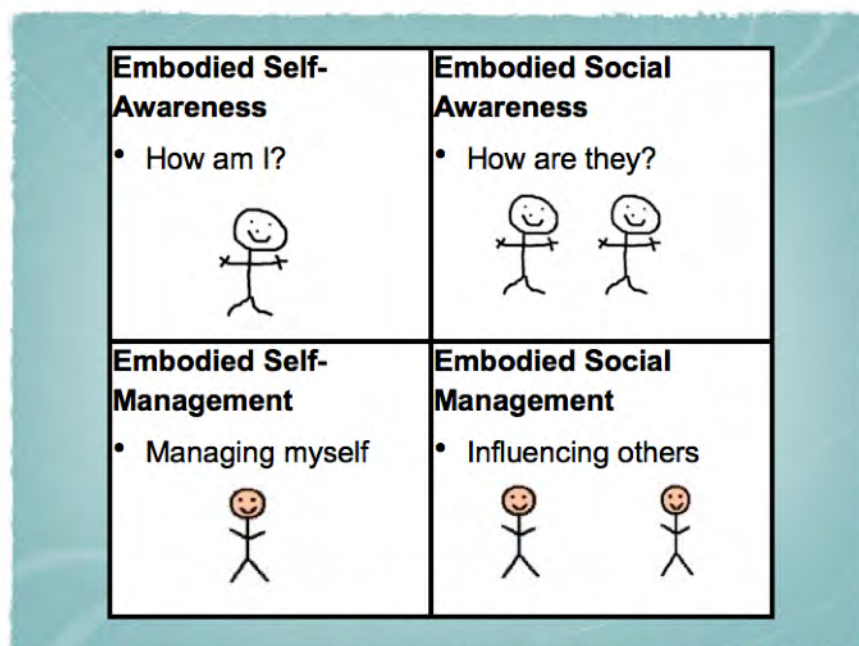
### **BE SKEPTICAL - TIPS ON USING THIS BOOK**

I first came across centring in the martial art of aikido - in the pressure of confrontation being uncentred - off-balance and tense physically, mentally and emotionally - is a recipe for disaster, so many martial arts work with it implicitly or explicitly. Since then I have taught centring everywhere from war-zones, to classrooms to board-rooms; with people in hundreds of occupations spanning five continents. People all over the world have all found it useful, it simply improves whatever they do. It is regularly assessed in feedback as the best “quick win” on facilitation, business leadership, time-management and stress-management courses that I run. Coaches find it incredibly helpful for themselves and their clients. It is one of the best simple techniques from the embodiment repertoire that facilitators can quickly pick up and pass on. Centring is not a cure-all, but it does help, and can make the difference between success and failure, broken and happy relationships, even between life and death. I’m aware that to say something improves *any* activity is a big claim, so I invite you to test it for yourselves with any measurables that you can find. Do *not* believe a word I say, but try-out the exercises in this book if you want to see for yourself. Be skeptical, but not cynical.

This book is full of little experiments and practices to try out: centring is not a theoretical skill but a practical one, so I highly recommend giving these a go. You can't learn centring from reading a book unless you apply what's here. You'll have also seen the first two reflections above and it's important you make this leaning personal if you're to get the most from it. Sharing these ideas and chatting over with people will also help, as will a review schedule, but you likely know all this as a facilitator so maybe I just remind you to apply what you know about skills acquisition and learning generally.

## CENTRING AS AN ASPECT OF EMBODIED INTELLIGENCE

Centring can be viewed as a skill-set that makes up one aspect of embodied intelligence. On the [Embodied Facilitator Course](#) we use the model below adapted from Daniel Goleman. Centring is part of the bottom left quadrant. Centring relies upon body-awareness (top left) as you have to know how you are to influence that, and forms the basis of effective listening and leadership (the right hand quadrants skills). Seeing it as a set of motor skills like any other, and not esoteric magic is a useful frame for learning in my experience.



## THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF CENTRING

People have likely always passed-on ways to relax under pressure to other people. The experts in this field however are martial artists, yogis, and teachers in related areas. Eastern body-mind disciplines are the biggest influence on centring, though Western ones are also in the mix. Aikido in particular has been a huge influence in modern times. Dance, theatre, body therapy, and bodywork techniques such as Alexander Technique and other more esoteric arts that make up the general field

of embodiment are all influences however, and this book brings many of these together. Often, when I teach centring someone will ask me if I got it from such-and-such a system when I haven't, as there's only so many ways a body works and people have discovered the techniques independently. There has also been a lot of cross-fertilisation between arts in the last 50 years.

## **CENTRING STORIES**

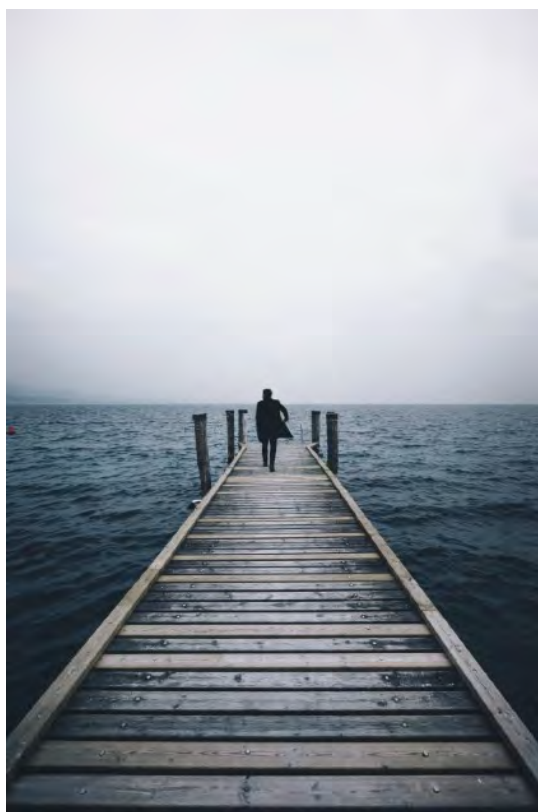
Centring has been an integral part of my life now for over twenty years, since I first learnt it on the mats of a university aikido club. It was one of the first aspects of embodied learning to make an impression on me as a practical technique due to its obvious efficacy, and it quickly improved my life. I have also used centring to stay calm in various extreme locations and unusual circumstances. Actually, sometimes "calm" would be overstating it, even unfair boasting at times. It did make me calmer though, and it certainly helped me make many decisions under pressure and has saved my life more than once.

To illustrate some of the beauty and utility of centring I want to tell a few stories from my life. It's actually hard to know where to begin, since centring has been involved in almost every major event in a helpful way! One of the first instances that I applied centring led to where I am now with my career, and illustrates a key point. Half-heartedly studying psychology at University involved a module on health psychology and a piece on stress. Coming woefully underprepared for the exam as usual, I was ironically...stressed. What I had been devoting myself to at University was aikido though, and there are breathing techniques in this art that I applied to calm myself down. Consequently I scraped a pass in that exam which kept me in University. On reflection, the difference between book learning about stress and a practical technique to manage stress struck me, and I had stumbled upon the central distinction of cognitive vs embodied knowledge that has been the focus of my life since. I had gotten to University on the back of being a naturally cognitively gifted child scoring in the top 0.1% in IQ tests, but had found that kind of abstract intelligence wanting. At the age of seventeen just before I moved to university I had been at a low point. I had lost my first love, without the emotional intelligence to maintain an intimate relationship, I had failed my driving test three times (in rural East Anglia where I'm from this is a big deal for independence), was drinking alcoholically and was suicidally depressed. I was smart enough to see that there were some important ways I was not so smart! I survived a last Summer working the farms of Cambridgeshire hung-over, and made it to Leeds University. On my first week I walked into an aikido class and the relaxed yet powerful circular motion spoke deeply to me. What I was seeing was centred effective ethical movement. Something in the paradox of a non-violent martial art, whispered the order and it

was exactly what my heartbroken, unhealthy young body needed. I threw myself into aikido study, hardly missing a class in my three years in Leeds, and combining it with psychology studies to reinvent what I'd later know as embodied training. Centring quickly became a favourite tool, from aikido tests, to presentations, to dates. Post education I applied it to work in outdoor education at the top of climbing towers, on archery ranges and on mountains with children and adults. Talk is cheap in such circumstances and simple techniques to calm oneself under pressure are of much value. Again, in such places, academic knowledge counts for little!

One of the biggest early illustrations of centring's gifts for me came at the end of a period of study with one of my teachers in California. I was called home under sad circumstances; my closest friend from University Rachel had a sudden psychotic break and committed suicide by jumping from Bristol's Clifton Suspension Bridge. The night before I flew home from my teacher's ranch that I was staying on, a storm lashed Marin county felling trees, tearing the flag pole of the ranch in two and battering the small wooden building I stayed in, as I cried like the torrential rain outside into the arms of my lover Soli. She managed to get me through the floods to the airport the next day and I went to Bristol to see Rachel's family. I sat with her parents, sister and with shared friends from University. I centred many times there and at the service, being a rock for those that needed me while never losing touch with my grief. This really showed me the power of centring, and how it can be used through the really hard times of life and not just for the special circumstances of aikido or California.

While my approach to centring has become more nuanced, teaching simple centring techniques remains a mainstay of even short workshops of almost any kind, and feedback from business clients is that it helps them too. One of my first clients was a local University near my current home of Brighton. Eight years after first teaching centring as part of a short time management workshop, a member of staff there said enthusiastically to a new group I was with, that she happened to bump into, "Ooohh, teach them that centring, I don't remember much else from your training...what's your



name?...but centring changed my life!!!". Another early client at a local government department commented that she had used it to stay calm in a severe earthquake while on holiday in China some years after being taught it (a critical detail) and I have heard feedback from numerous humanitarian aid workers I have trained pre-deployment or in the field in areas of starvation, torture, mass-rape and war, of how it has helped them stay safe and sane. Some of their stories are too horrible to share here, but centring was useful for these people at the sharpest edge of things. (Between working with kids and corporates, I did a few years work in areas of conflict and find that I can relate to such groups).

A nice story that I can relate to is from the once troubled country of Sierra Leone. I was working with both soldiers and "mommy queens" (the powerful wives of army officers) who learnt centring and used it to keep calm when meditating disputes between military families - no small thing in a country ravaged by civil war. I used it while in Afghanistan with military helicopters flying overhead, scared for my life a number of times, and while inside a crashing car rolling in a bean-field in Cambridgeshire after a mis-judged attempt to overtake a truck. As the car rolled and crushed, and glass fragments fell around me in slow-motion like hard snowflakes, I thought, "well fuck it, I might as well centre now". I did, and walked away with only a few scratches and bruises...much to my own, and the emergency service's surprise.

On the brighter side of life, I've centred before popping the question to my now wife Daria - who I met as my translator while training Ukrainian psychotherapists in centring incidentally - and when I watched in awe as she walked down the aisle. Also when I held my barely alive niece in hospital less than a day old after a traumatic birth, and told her though my body it was all going to be OK (it was, she is seven now and in great health).

Teaching centring to others is gratifying of course, I love my job. I enjoy how centring gives people a sense of empowerment, so they don't have to be a victim of circumstances. This shift is actually quite a big one - from a victim with the body as a problem, to a leader whose body is an ally. I hear nice things from coaches on how the "quick win" of centring has helped them get quickly to the heart of issues with clients, and see its impact directly with my own coachees. With cynical corporate "hard-nosed" groups it works well to "prove" embodied work works, and opens them up to other unusual things. People can quite clearly see a difference before and after applying a technique as in most cases it's not subtle, and I've learnt to trust the techniques whoever I'm working with.

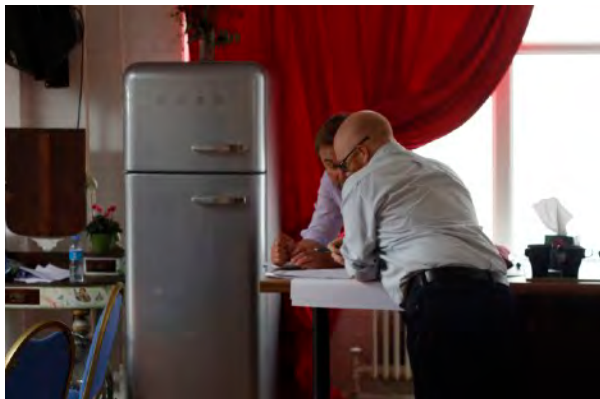
I can remember many other circumstances where centring has helped; such as after learning such-and-such a dictator wanted me dead in Ethiopia; while having to take " Hamas breaks " in a stairwell during a workshop in Israel under frightening (if ineffective) rocket-fire; when my girlfriend and I were living and working in the violence-soaked slums of Brazil and she told me she was beaten regularly by her father and needed help; when getting sober and walking past a pub "dry" for the first time; when I got a call from my sister saying she's in an ambulance with my father who had tried to kill himself; when I sat with him in the hospital and discussed what he'd done; when I gave his eulogy when he died of natural causes much later; when men with AK47s pointed at me and shouted in African languages I didn't understand; when having dinner with an Egyptian minister (pre Arab Spring) and his Cleopatraesque wife and realising I'd accidentally encouraged them to have someone killed who was bothering my then boss. Ooops. (don't worry, we re-centred and said while it was terribly nice of him to offer we'd rather have the person left alive). There are other examples which would get me in WAY too much trouble to share :-)

Aside from continual survival, what is most gratifying is seeing centring help people in day-to-day circumstances. Where centring most often helps me is not in aikido, or in big dramas, but in the little dramas of rows about chores at home, in traffic, managing too many e-mails, waiting for a delayed train again, an annoying text or comment online, etc. In embodied training sometimes people are seeking special powers but simple self-regulation is the real magic. Centring can help us with the thousand little victories that make a life. The thousand little leanings to kindness and wisdom that make a friendship, career or romance. I think of a Swiss working mother who felt overwhelmed by workload and couldn't turn off at the end of the day, who now centres as she turns her computer on, and again as she reenters her home having turned it off. I also think of a British IT middle manager who is a great guy but had a bad temper, who learnt to control his outbursts and gets his career and marriage back on track. Also a young graduate in a Dutch telecoms company who centres and overcomes her nerves when giving presentations to senior managers. The geeky guy on an open workshop who gets shy with women but can now centre and ask them out on dates. The gay teenager who was bullied and now stands up for himself. The activists who are just as passionate but less resentful and more persuasive. The insurance sales team who have learnt to get on a bit better. The student who procrastinates less. The airline executives who listen better. The academics who manage their time and make it home for dinner...etc. While it's the war-stories of centring and naming famous past clients like L'Oreal, Unilever, Ikea, Shell or the House of Lords (I very briefly trained peers before a trip to



the prisons of Iraq) that tend to grab people's attention, so excuse me for sharing a few colourful ones here, the real beauty of centring for me is day to day.

I have taught centring to thousands of people around the world, and EFC students



over the years to many thousands more. Online videos of centring that we've created have had close to a million hits and with much positive feedback. I think of centring as a positive virus spreading and improving life. With some clients we clearly see the impact of working with them over time, or see immediate results, other times it's merely suggested; for example, I taught centring to the board of a corporate investment group in a luxurious five star hotel and afterwards sat in on them in meetings.

They started to discuss environmental sustainability and diversity and I asked, "Do you normally talk about this kind of thing?", somewhat surprised. "No, but it seemed more important today to work on stuff that actually matters" was their response. Centring gets people in touch with themselves, their values and each other.

There are other times when I just don't know the effects, especially after quicker jobs: did it help the top policewoman responsible for all armed police response in Britain? The publishing company that incorporates it into heated decision-making meetings on cover designs? The angry top London chefs? The celebrity star-let who went to Congo as a charity representative to talk to rape victims there? The 200 sassy but stressed medical receptionists in Sussex? The group responsible for greening one of the biggest corporations on the planet? The unhappy local single-mums group? The trainee bankers now likely running the country? The overly-nice cancer-care nurses who couldn't say no? The radicals at Occupy? From the clients I've heard back from, or done repeat work with, I'd guess yes.

It's also really nice to see how Embodied Facilitator Course students have taken it in their own directions, that's the beauty of a principles-based approach - seeing people make it their own. Aside from the many corporate coaches and facilitators, we've seen an improvisational comedian adapt centring to her needs, an Israeli doula for hers, a horse-rider teach how to do it in the saddle, various martial arts and yoga teachers blend it with their own styles, a tantric tango teacher, a feminist activist, a body-positive activist, a Russian gay rights campaigner, a mediator,

many therapists, senior HR managers in blue-chip companies, etc. People have taken it in all kinds of creative directions.

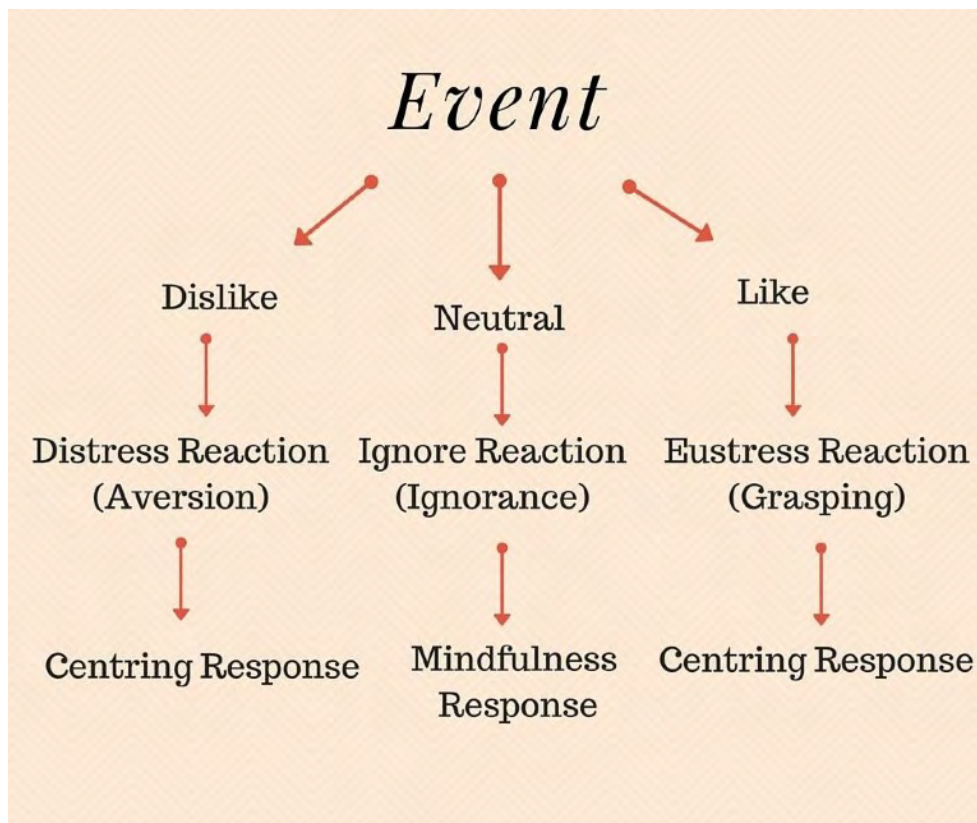
Lest this piece seem gratuitously self-congratulatory, and also to allow room for being human, it's maybe worth telling a few tales of failure too! Centring is not a cure-all and sometimes I just can't do it. This is sometimes because I've allowed myself to go too far into an unhelpful state before I try it (much easier to catch oneself early!), that I am tired and hungry and run down, or more often these days that some shadow is at work (see chapter on this). Some relationships get to the stage when centring becomes very difficult and at least once a month I belatedly catch myself losing it and feel embarrassed to be an embodiment teacher. Well at least I catch myself sometimes I guess! I struggle with management issues and like everyone, the people I love most and have the most history with. The joke is that centring in Afghanistan was easily compared to the family dinner when I got home. All in all though, centring has had a massive positive impact on my life and many others, so I hope there's some inspiration for practice here.

- See also the real world applications section later in this e-book, and Paul Linden's "Breakfast Essays" book of embodiment stories if you like this kind of thing.



## THE THREE CAUSES OF ALL OUR PROBLEMS

There are really just three causes to all our suffering - liking stuff, not liking stuff, and being indifferent to things! Or more accurately: our reaction of aversion to what we don't like, grasping after and clinging to what we do like, and ignoring what we're indifferent to. This is basic Buddhist psychology, and while it may first appear that the world outside ourselves is the cause of suffering, on reflection sages and psychologists from many traditions have found it is in fact our reaction to it. This is logical in that any given thing can cause distress in some but not others - two people stuck in traffic, or listening to a band, may be having very different reactions for instance! S&M provides a more extreme example.



To ignore what's happening takes us out of contact with reality, whether internal emotional reality or the external world. The distress response is something we do unconsciously in our bodies when we don't like what's happening, and suffering is the result. In Western scientific terms an aversive response is referred to as "fight or flight". Less readily identified (though our culture is built on it!) is that we also suffer when we crave after what we want and like, and fear losing it and mourn its loss. In an ever changing world, even what we get and like causes pain in the end! The bodily response to wanting/clinging is actually remarkably similar to distress, so we call it the eustress response.

Mindfulness (the now fashionable) directing of attention non-judgmentally back to sensations in the present moment, reduces the fundamental problem of ignoring reality. Centring techniques are built on this, and this necessary condition is one reason why we place a lot of emphasis on building awareness and the capacity to direct attention as a foundation for embodied work. You can't do something different until you know what you're doing, to paraphrase embodied grandfather Moshe Feldenkrais. Centring techniques are a practical means of managing our in-built and conditioned maladaptive responses of distress and eustress once we learn to notice them. We still have preferences, emotions and healthy desires of course, but they need not push us around so unskillfully or cause us so much unhappiness.

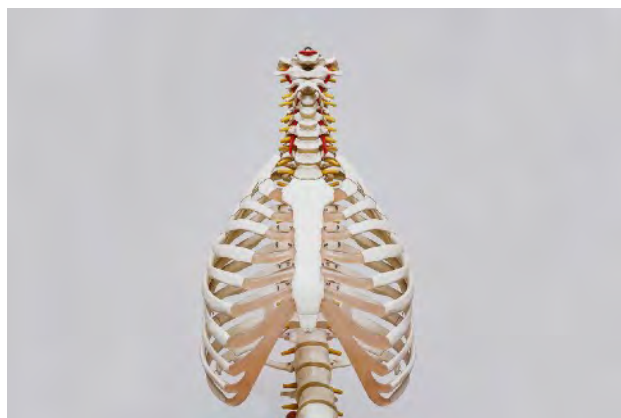
## Physiology

### **PHYSIOLOGICAL REACTIONS**

Any potential challenge or pleasure in our environment brings up attention to the stimuli, with an accompanying physiological reaction that is often maladaptive - it hinders not helps happiness, any task at hand and relationships. Being human, we can store all sorts of memories and Pavlovian associations, and add all kinds of thoughts, making any stimuli a potential stressor, as well as the few that are physiologically pre-programmed such as pain, cold water and loud startling noises. The movement of attention towards a stimuli is normally adaptive (e.g. "shit, a car is coming towards me, move!") the physical response may be (adrenaline kicks in to supercharge the system in this case) or may not (the stress causes muscles to contract and breathing to stop for example, both of which stop us moving quickly - the proverbial "rabbit in the headlight" in this case). In the modern world most stressors do not require the responses that evolution has endowed us with. It is unlikely that you are going to actually fight with or flight from your boss or partner for example, so we have a problem - what to do with this now unhelpful arousal?

Many health problems occur due to people being repeatedly triggered into this primitive reaction in a modern context where one can't literally fight or flight<sup>3</sup>. See the book *"Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers"* by Robert Sapolsky for more on this. In the short term people react in less intelligent, less creative and less kind ways as our neurology and biology shift from higher cortical and relational functions to more primitive "reptilian" ones. In short, both stress and wanting something badly causes us to be dumb, dull and mean.

The distress reaction is our response to what we don't like and can be further subdivided into categories. Fight-flight is the better known of the two groups of the distress reaction that can have a negative impact on us. This is the hyper-arousal reaction associated with the sympathetic nervous system which overshoots useful attention activation to unhelpful stress. The other major group could be called "freeze-fold" (giving us "FFFF" from now on!) and is when we close down rather than fire up. In this "hypo" reaction, associated with one branch of the parasympathetic nervous system (unmyelinated vagus nerve) function is still impaired but this is expressed quite differently. The balancing aspect of the autonomic (unconscious) parasympathetic function is sometimes called "rest and digest system" which balances fight-flight, especially through the myelinated vagus-nerve social engagement aspect of the system. See Stephen Porges work for more on this.



In people and other mammals, we can also talk of "fawn", "false friend" or "flock" as related reactions where we act in placating submission to authority, threat and high status individuals, or group together like prey animals might for defence. This was mapped by renowned German psychoanalyst Karen Horney as a "towards" reaction rather than an "against" (fight) or "away" (flight) reaction. Sometimes "tend and befriend" is listed as a gendered parasympathetic nervous system response (said to be more likely in women), but we think this is a mistake as in the short term all genders exhibit a limited range of classic fight-flight-freeze-fawn responses. We'd

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<sup>3</sup> As a side note, if one is really perusing excellence in fighting or running, the old reactions are actually unhelpful. We know from the martial arts and athletics that even where actual fight or flighting is involved, the left-over vestibular responses we have are mostly unhelpful. Watch any great athlete - they are relaxed, well aligned, balanced and free to move! A soldier has a greater field of vision to see potential threats when relaxed than when tense and with a narrow focus, etc.



classify tend and befriend as a critical parasympathetic nervous system strategy for reducing arousal levels by activating social engagement systems, though it could be classified more of a longer time-frame stress reaction, but this is academic. Women are in many cultures socialised into this response, and possibly predisposed to it through oxytocin biology (the now legendary "hug hormone"), and often do reach out to others for support more readily, but this is far from universal and we're loathe to prop-up gender stereotypes. More on "towards" when we look at social centring later.

Because of the superficial similarities of sexual arousal to fight-flight, increased heart rate and reduced in neocortical activity for example, reproduction is sometimes jokingly referred to as "another F" alongside fight and flight. Really though, both sympathetic and parasympathetic social engagement nervous systems are firing in reproductive arousal, so it's a different category, and more associated with eustress reactions quite naturally! Likewise, this dual firing is why "feed and breed" is sometimes mentioned alongside "rest and digest", as reproductive response also shares similarities with a stand-alone parasympathetic system activation and is in some ways incompatible with sympathetic activation (hence why sex can be stress reducing but also why stress can interfere with sexual function). Perhaps it's best to rely more on biology than rhyming and words that happen to begin with F!

The eustress reaction, or grasping, is less discussed in Western psychological or physiological literature and is our response to pleasure. It is remarkably similar to a FFFF response in nature.

Sometimes in discussion of stress, sympathetic and parasympathetic branches of the nervous systems are simplistically considered "accelerator" and "brakes", but it's more complex than this as both are active (parasympathetic activates digestion for example), the latter has two aspects and they interact in complex ways. There is also the slower working but powerful hormonal system. More from Anouk on biology below for those that are interested.

## **TRAUMA AND FIGHT-FLIGHT-FREEZE-FOLD**

Much could be said about trauma but a connection here is that long-term trauma reactions can be seen as being "stuck" in fight-flight-freeze-fold, with many symptoms such as hyper-vigilance, anger issues, anxiety and sleeplessness clearly related to fight-flight arousal and others like emotional numbing, learnt helplessness and sexual and relationship difficulties linked to freezing and folding. Memory and other systems are involved too, so it's more complex than this, but it's useful for beginners to understand and make the link between trauma and FFFF.



## **THE PURPOSE OF CENTRING**

What any distress or eustress reaction does is interfere with the essentials of embodiment that make a person function effectively. These are:

- Awareness - in a FFFF reaction we space-out or become fixated
- Acceptance - we deny reality
- Intention - it gets lop-sided
- Imagery - we become habitual not conscious in what we picture and predict
- Relaxation - we tense up and contract
- Structure and balance - we can collapse, twist or go off balance
- Movement - we can lose freedom and energy
- Responsiveness - we close down to others

Centring restores these, bringing us back into choice from acquired habit and maladaptive genetics. Being able to centre does though rely upon some awareness of being present or we won't know we need to use any technique! As ever in embodied work, awareness and choice as central, and "enabling choice over oneself" is another broad definition of centring. Because the FFFF response is itself toxic to self-awareness, centring is most easily employed when we "catch ourselves" in the early stages of reaction, before we become blind to what we need to inhibit. FFFF numbs us to what we need to notice! Centring techniques therefore need to be practiced repeatedly to become second-nature and be done early enough.

Here are the two main varieties of distress reaction based upon your body increasing or reducing arousal levels under pressure:

### **HYPER REACTION**

*- Increased arousal. Excess yang/ fire and air metaphorically. Fight and flight.*

"Fight" or "flight" both involve holding and contraction of muscles and breath, and therefore less relaxation and freedom of movement. Also off balancing and loss of structural alignment; forwards for fight, backwards for flight. It would more accurately be called the "gearing you up to fight or flight and doing things which stop this happening effectively" response, like hitting the accelerator and breaks on a car simultaneously while turning the drivers brain off (called an "amygdala hijack" by some). No matter how smart, creative and kind people are, they can lose this under pressure without training, "the body always wins" as Wendy Palmer says. This

response requires relaxation centring to reduce arousal, e.g. focus on and lengthening on exhale.

## **HYP0 REACTION**

- *Reduced arousal. Excess yin/ water and earth metaphorically. Freeze and fold.*

“Freezing” - involves more tension and movement inhibition, numbing (disassociation), structural collapse and unbalancing which is also called “flop” or “fold”. In animals this response is related to pain reduction and “playing dead”, so as not to be seen or left for dead to eat later by a predator. Clearly this is nearly always maladaptive in a modern context, although for trauma cursors it may have been what made life tolerable at the time. This response requires energising and presencing centring to increase awareness and arousal, e.g. focus on and lengthening on inhale.

Note: these responses are primitive animal instincts. There are other less primitive and socially mediated versions of hypo and hyper response patterns such as manipulation, deviousness and charm which usually involve similar but subtler patterns.

Ideally what we are looking to do with any centring technique is return to the primary natural, healthy and adaptive “interest response”:

## **INTEREST REACTION**

- Moderate arousal (sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems in balance). Flow, feel and fink (sorry, “think” is not an F ;-)

Attention, curiosity and focus. Relaxed, well structured, balanced and free and energised to move. This also enables relationship critically. Many people confuse hyper-arousal with this “flow, feel and fink” response.

## **THE EUSTRESS RESPONSE AND PLEASURE CENTRING**

Far less well known is that fight-flight is the eustress reaction, known in Eastern traditions as “grasping” or “attachment”. Culturally we have little distinction between a healthy desire and an off-balance grasping, and mostly it operates in quite a subtle manner and not obvious, so this response is less well known. In embodiment terms one is not problematic while the other creates disruption to aspects of embodiment previously described (typically a subtle state of tension and asymmetry remarkably similar to mild fight-flight, but usually less extreme) that causes a similar loss of happiness, connection and functionality. It is perhaps obvious however that severe addictions cause tension, a loss of freedom, create misery, relationship diffi-



culties and reduced functionality. The addict however in both body-mind and behaviour is simply acting in a more extreme version of any off-centre behaviour linked to pleasure and the eustress reaction, and we all have mini compulsions and tensions around what we want daily.

The eustress response is actually subtly unpleasant and its relief from this we seek in grasping after something or grasping to not lose something. This is apparent in the glutton and the addict as opposed to a more centred connoisseur, so working to reduce this response is actually about enjoying life more as well as managing ourselves for reasons of ethics, functionality or health. This is quite an unusual notion as in both Western culture and most Eastern body-mind systems, being taught to enjoy pleasures more is quite a foreign concept!

As far as we know I am one of the few mainstream embodiment teachers to work with the eustress reaction and what I call "pleasure centring" as an antidote. Pleasure centring techniques are identical to other centring techniques but applied to the grasping eustress response. Many embodiment schools come from the martial arts where people attacking you tend to bring up unpleasant feelings, so the subtleties of loss of function to attachment are less obvious! Neo-tantra often works in this aspect through sexuality though often not in a way applicable to daily life and coaching, especially in more conservative contexts. I came to the realisation of the necessity of pleasure centring myself after noticing how many of the issues in my life were created by "nice" not "nasty" things, and wanting tools to work with these too!

[More on pleasure centring here.](#)

See Clare Myatt's niece later on addiction and centring too.

### **MINDFULNESS, ACCEPTANCE AND LISTENING TO THE BODY**

Every centring technique relies upon mindfulness as its foundation. Just bringing your awareness to the present moment in any form will reduce both unhealthy hyper (stressed-out) and hypo (spaced out) arousal. If someone read this book and just came away with "when I'm stressed it's useful to feel my body" I would be happy. Some of the techniques described simply provide an activity in the present

moment that is interesting or difficult enough to ensure mindfulness! Others add to these actions which are physiologically incompatible with the distress response and reduce it through direct biological means. It is also worth reminding ourselves at this point that acceptance is necessary before any change, and a certain amount of "being with" is necessary before undoing the distress response which is there to bring us information about potential threats after all! The sense is, "Thank you body, I get the message, now it's time to respond to that effectively", rather than using relaxation centring to ignore reality or wake-up centring to push through appropriate tiredness for example. More on listening to the body in later chapters.

## **EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL CENTRING**

Generally centring relies upon body-awareness but it's possible to regulate your state using other senses. Listening is 360 degrees and "opening" your vision to make it more peripheral are two such examples. There are advantages to this type of "external" centring for people who are traumatised and find the body a dangerous place to go at all. The obvious disadvantage is that because the FFFF/grasping response is a physiological one, you're working one step removed from the body where it happens.

. Another advantage is that it connects you to the external world, and this is helpful for those with a tendency to go inwards more than is helpful. My colleague and eco-psychologist Dr Adrian Harris uses these techniques in his nature connection work for this reason too.



## **CULTURAL AND INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES, AND ORDERS OF REACTIVITY**

The distress and eustress reactions are cross-cultural and shared by all people - actually they are shared by many animals, stemming from the "reptilian" brain. Individually however, while the basic fight-flight-freeze-fold and grasping reactions are essentially identical cross-culturally (I have taught centring in 25+ countries and with people from most nations and many subcultures, so have some confidence in this assertion) there is some individual variation in which aspect/s of the basic reactions is most expressed and there are various theories as to how stress responses are ordered. For example, the usual order of response is that under pressure people will freeze at first briefly, then try and flee, then fight if they cannot, and then eventually fold if it's ongoing. Evolutionarily it makes sense that when threatened an animal would at first freeze briefly (minimises danger and expends little energy), may then flight (more energy) and last if cornered, fight (most risk). If in a no-win situation a further more dissociative freeze could then be implored as a last resort like a

gazelle in a lions jaw playing dead. More on this in the extended section on biology below. While I see some basis for these type of sequences in people's actual responses to pressure, they are not universal in expression and think it's best to study one's own reactions without expectation and treat clients as individuals, as different parts of this sequence seem more



accessible to different people. Some seem to have a preference for which "F" is most dominant. To take myself as an example; I am more prone to aggressive "fight" responses (as a child I had asthma, and only triggers by running so this may be a factor) and I have a colleague who usually does a kind of closing down and going "dense" somatically, which could be seen as flight or freeze. Under pressure at work I can get pushy, and my colleague quietly grumpy without effective centring. My wife has a withdrawal pattern that's different again. It's really useful to know the patterns of those around you daily for "early warning signs" and maintaining harmonious relationships.

I see some consistency across types of stressors in individual response that can be linked to preferences such as personality type systems (e.g. four elements or MBTI), though I would not quite go so far as to use stress response alone as a personality typology as it's usually complex.

### **A CULTURE OF REACTIVITY?**

While discussing centring as an individual skill needed to counter an individual fight-flight reaction, let's not lose the bigger context, as we are embodied in place and culture too. Ironically while we live in a time where most do not face life and death threats on a daily basis, and there's a strong case to be made that we live in a fight-flight culture. The fast pace, noise, population density, family structure, workload, media-bias and recreation cultures, and many other factors of the modern world, mean most of us are *constantly* in a mild state of reactive arousal, where the base-line "norm" is now already well triggered to fight-flight with disastrous consequences for health, happiness and relationships.

To examine the grasping reaction too, without framing it within a consumer society hooked on hooking us would also be remiss. Our economic system is addicted to

creating unnecessary desires within us, and stimulating the grasping reaction every possible chance to sell more and more. A high level of fight-flight background "noise" both reduces our noticing, and our stamina to resist a culture of more. Numbing through long-term fight-flight, a see-saw between over and under stimulation, and other factors makes mindfulness difficult, let alone self-regulation. A political reading of this physiological situation, is that there are those who benefit from this reactive culture to offer leaders who speak to fear, and sell products that do the same. We are not stressed as an isolated accident, we are being systematically stressed for the benefit of a few.

If this political reading doesn't work for you, what I'd ask you to consider is simply that the bigger picture matters.

### **AROUSAL BASELINES**

What the cultural consideration reveals is the concept of arousal baselines. This is sometimes called parasympathetic tone or vagal tone (after a central nerve involved) and points to the fact that we can be closer or further from "losing it" irrespective of events, based upon our underlying biological condition. We all have periods whether they be bad days or difficult years even, where we are easily triggered, or have seen someone "snap" at a small event after prolonged stress. There is even some evidence to suggest that this can be set at birth by stress during pregnancy and even be intergenerational, for example in the descendants of holocaust survivors<sup>4</sup>.

### **Reflection exercise**

What would you say is your stress baseline? How does your environment and cultural context impact this?

### **GENERAL RELAXATION FACTORS - LOWERING BASELINE AROUSAL**

While centring is effective even when times are tough, it's worth considering the wider issues that effect how much we are likely to need it! There are lifestyle factors which aid a general sense of relaxation. These have been well established by scientific research and include all the usual candidates:

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<sup>4</sup> see for example the work of Gabor Maté



- Safety! If we are not physically safe, either in reality or have a sense of this culturally through bodily dispositions or unconscious narratives ("life is dangerous"), or even inter-generationally (I have seen the latter in Israel for example - Mark) then we will not be relaxed. Working with groups who live in dangerous places like humanitarian aid workers or people who are around danger in otherwise safe societies, this is often apparent. e.g. life emergency responders.
- High levels of social support, appreciation, affection and respect - we are social animals. We have found this to be one of the most significant resilience factors across many groups. Groups with good social support - like many soldiers or fire personnel for example - can cope with a lot, while those who feel isolated with very little. Belonging is soothing. See also social centring.
- Autonomy - freedom. Not feeling in control of one's life is stressful.
- Diet - there are many theories and individual differences here but for most, chilli and sugar will be stimulating for example and high protein and complex vegetable carbohydrates more "grounding".
- Stimulant use - due to their effect on the adrenals stimulants like nicotine and caffeine put us closer to a FFF response. In working with corporate cases of anger management we have found this to be a particularly important variable.
- Being around people you know - strangers (e.g. when commuting) and cities are stressful to our tribal minds, which see people we don't know as threatening.
- Touch - three hugs a day for survival, ten for growth (we made that up but you get the point). Firm non-sexual touch is the most relaxing - lighter touch effects different sense receptors in the skin and is more stimulating. Animals are a reasonable substitute for people as (sadly) many elderly and homeless people will testify to.
- Hot baths, showers and being around water in general.
- Natural light and lower levels of artificial light - think lunch-time walks outside and lamps and candles in the evening.
- Lower noise levels - background noise such as in open-plan offices is stressful.
- Exercise - get some.
- Nature, especially open space (think nice views), being by water (it's not just the drugs that makes Amsterdam relaxing) and green plants (research shows even one office plant can help people relax and be more creative for example).<sup>5</sup>

## MEANING MAKING

As organisms, humans are more future and past orientated than many animals,

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<sup>5</sup> see for example: Dr. Roger S. Ulrich of Texas A&M University, Helen Russell, Surrey University, England as well as the recent studies conducted by Dr. Virginia Lohr of Washington State University that plants significantly lower workplace stress and enhances productivity.

meaning-making is also key when considering human stress. What an event *means* is central to how stressful it is, whether that be straightforward or more symbolic. A small trigger like a “dirty look” can have a lot of perceived meaning for example. Symbolism too can be surprisingly powerful; I had a friend who immediately burst into tears after seeing the red light stopping her from crossing the road, after she had just had her first period for example. The same light the day before hadn’t bothered her. Identity is also critical in stress, for example someone losing a job that is central to their conception of themselves.

## **MORE ON THE BIOLOGY OF FIGHT-FLIGHT AND CENTERING**

– by Anouk Brack (EFC guest embodiment teacher, Leadership Embodiment trainer, MSc. biology), with editing from Mark Walsh.

This is an extra section with more biology for those that this is interesting for. I asked my more physiologically educated friend Anouk to help.

### **Introduction**

Talking about body and mind like separate things is understandable but misleading. Our body (including the brain and the mind) is an intricate system with myriad feedback loops that function for the most part autonomically. We overestimate our free will and underestimate the power of the instinctual and emotional patterns. What we can do however is learn to recognise our unwanted responses sooner by studying them (awareness), recognising that this is the reality at the moment (acceptance), and consciously practicing new behaviour (adaptation, or intention). This will increase our capacity to influence our responses to challenging situations. Centering is one of the main techniques useful for this.

In the following text I will explain the biology of stress, fight-flight-freeze-fold, and effect of centering on our physiological state of being in the moment. Reality is always more complicated than a few words on paper. I am trying to keep it understandable for non-biologists, as well as bringing some nuance and busting some misunderstandings.

### **THREE LEVELS OF SAFETY**

Whenever we feel threatened, we have three levels of trying to return to safety: 1. social engagement, 2. fight or flight, and 3. freeze or collapse. In the book *The Body Keeps the Score* (p 82) Bessel van der Kolk says it well: “The autonomic nervous system regulates three fundamental physiological states. The level of safety determines which one of these is activated at any particular time. Whenever we feel threatened, we instinctively turn to the:

1- first level, *social engagement*. We call out for help, support and comfort from the people around us.

2- But if no one comes to our aid, or we're in immediate danger, the organism reverts to a more primitive way to survive: *fight or flight*. We fight off our attacker, or we run to a safe place.

3- However, if this fails we can't get away, we're held down or trapped – the organism tries to preserve itself by shutting down and expending as little energy as possible. We are then in a state of *freeze or collapse*.”

Before we look into the biology of these levels of safety, let us get an overview of our entire nervous system.

## OVERVIEW OF NERVOUS SYSTEM

Down from the brain and brain stem the nervous tissue stretches down into the spinal cord. The nerves (both sympathetic, parasympathetic and somatic) run all through the body. Imagine it like how blood vessels run all through the body from and to the heart, similarly do nerves run through the body from and to the spinal cord and brain.

Some reflexes and instincts are taken care of directly in the spinal cord and only get sent up to the brain as an FYI. For example: “FYI you just touched something that was very hot and the retract-hand-quickly-sequence has been successfully initiated.” Overriding something as powerful and connected to our survival like that is difficult and can only be done with practice and preparation, if at all. In such a moment there is simply not time and need for a creative, rational response.

The body's nervous system consists of the Central Nervous System (CNS) and the Peripheral Nervous System (PNS). Central Nervous System (CNS) is the central hub of our nervous system and consists of the brain and the spinal cord. “Peripheral” in PNS refers to it as being located “towards the outside” as viewed from the brain and along the body's vertical axis.

Here's an overview of the entire nervous system and its components.

### Nervous system

#### Central nervous system

- Brain
- Spinal cord



## Peripheral nervous system

- **Somatic**
  - Sensory nerve
  - Motor nerve
  - Cranial nerve
  - Spinal nerve
- 
- **Autonomic**
  - Sympathetic
  - Parasympathetic (includes Polyvagal)
  - Enteric (gut brain)

The PNS consists of the somatic (SNS) and the autonomic nervous system (ANS). The SNS, or voluntary nervous system handles the voluntary skeletal muscle movement. The Autonomic nervous system (ANS) acts largely unconsciously and regulates bodily functions such as the heart rate, digestion, respiratory rate, pupillary response, urination, and sexual arousal. This system is the primary mechanism in control of the fight-or-flight response. It consists of the sympathetic (SNS) and parasympathetic nervous system (PSNS), and the nervous system of the gut (Enteric).

Let's look at these components of the nervous system in a little more detail:

## CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM: BRAIN AND SPINAL CORD

### Evolutionary layers in our brain - triune brain

Evolutionary the brain was built from the bottom up. Directly on top of our spine sits the brain stem also called reptile brain, on top of that the limbic system (associated with mammals), and on top and around that the famous neocortex with its mostly human prefrontal cortex. It's like in [Stuart Davis' song The Ladder](#): *"I've got brains like antique floors, I built each one on the one before, I use all three, but they don't agree."*

This triune model ("tri-une" referring to three brains in one) of the mammalian brain is a (over) simplified organising theme. The broad explanatory value makes this approximation very engaging.

- the "neocortex" present in mammals is particularly large in humans and a few other mammals. It represents that cluster of brain structures involved in advanced cognition, including planning, modelling and simulation; This cognitive brain is the youngest part and occupies 30% of the area inside the skull. Function: Mostly concerned with outside world: how things and people work, how to accomplish goals and manage time.

- the "limbic brain" refers to those brain structures, wherever located, associated with social and nurturing behaviours, mutual reciprocity, and other behaviours and affects that we share with all mammals;
- and the "reptilian brain" refers to those brain structures related to territoriality, ritual behaviour and other "reptile" behaviours. It is in charge of our survival.

### **Below the brain: many nerves with feedback loops**

Below the brain stem the spinal cord starts with many nerves going into the body and back up from the body. Nerves have a direction: motor nerves for movement going down from the brain into the body (efferent – away from brain) and sensory nerves for sensing local physiological state in tissues and organs going back up to the spinal cord and brain (afferent – towards brain). Within both types of nerves there are inhibitory and excitatory synapses between neurons.

Although the ANS is also known as the visceral nervous system, the ANS is only connected with the motor side. Most autonomous functions are involuntary but they can often work in conjunction with the somatic nervous system which provides voluntary control. NB - "somatic" as used here has a specific biological meaning and is not a byword for embodiment, which is how it is sometimes used.

### **Autonomic Nervous System (ANS)**

The autonomic nervous system is responsible for regulating the body's unconscious actions. This system consists of 3 parts sympathetic, parasympathetic and enteric. We'll look more closely at the first two and their interactions.

### **Sympathetic Nervous System**

The sympathetic nervous system is often considered the activity, movement and "fight or flight" system, while the parasympathetic nervous system is often considered the "rest and digest" or "feed and breed" system. In many cases, both of these systems have "opposite" actions where one system activates a physiological response and the other inhibits it. The sympathetic nervous system is a "quick response mobilising system" and the parasympathetic is a "more slowly activated dampening system", but even this has exceptions, such as in sexual arousal and orgasm, wherein both play a role.

### **Misunderstanding: That sympathetic is only fight-flight is wrong**

It is not true that the sympathetic nervous system's only function is fight-flight. It does much more. It's responsible for interaction with the outside world. When we get excited about something that's a sympathetic response.

### **Parasympathetic Nervous System (PSNS) and its Polyvagal nerve**

This system is taking care of internal environment: resting, digesting, healing. The famous Polyvagal nerve is part of the parasympathetic nervous system (PSNS) which is a part of the autonomic nervous system. Polyvagus means "many branched vagus nerve". The Polyvagal Theory was developed by Dr. Stephen Porges, Director of the Brain-Body

Center at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The theory makes a distinction between two branches of the vagus and proposes that each branch supports different adaptive behavioural strategies. These autonomic subsystems are behaviourally linked to social communication (e.g. facial expression, vocalisation, listening), mobilisation (e.g., fight-flight behaviours) and immobilisation (e.g. feigning death, vaso-vagal syncope, and behavioural shutdown).

The three circuits can be conceptualised as dynamic, providing adaptive responses to safe, dangerous, or life threatening events and contexts. (Porges' Polyvagal Theory)

The theory specifies two functionally distinct branches of the vagus, or tenth cranial nerve. The branches of the vagal nerve serve different evolutionary stress responses in mammals: the more primitive branch (Dorsal Vagal Complex or DVC) elicits immobilisation behaviours (e.g., freeze and feigning death), whereas the more evolved branch (Ventral Vagal Complex or VVC) is linked to social communication and self-soothing behaviours. The vagal system is in opposition to the sympathetic-adrenal system, which is involved in mobilisation behaviours.

The most primitive systems are activated only when the more evolved structures fail. These neural pathways regulate autonomic state and the expression of emotional and social behaviour. Thus, according to this theory, physiological state dictates the range of behaviour and psychological experience. Polyvagal theory has many implications for the study of stress, emotion, and social behaviour.

The ANS with the PSNS and Polyvagal cannot be consciously controlled directly. They can however be influenced, more on that towards the end of this text in the part on "Getting out of flight-fight and the value of centering".

### **Misunderstanding: Saying SNS is active and PSNS is passive is wrong**

It is not true that the sympathetic is active and parasympathetic is not active. They are both motor nerves, creating activity somewhere. When parasympathetic triggers a response somewhere it is increasing activity in for instance the stomach, liver, intestines, etc. Parasympathetic nerves do not directly inhibit or turn off sympathetic nerves. It's about where blood-flow is directed. So it doesn't have to be either/or. Comes from agonist-antagonist thinking that is not useful here. For example in our eye constriction and dilation; both are done using active muscles, but the effects are opposite. So it's not that we get dilation just from not constricting.

Here is an example of how interwoven these feedback loops are. In the heart: the sympathetic speeds up heart and parasympathetic (vagus nerve) slows it down. The absence of parasympathetic input will increase the HR without sympathetic. Add sympathetic input to it and the heart rate goes up further. Also the tissue level has its own regulation and rhythm as well that is influenced from outside by sympathetic and parasympathetic.

## **Via somatic nervous system our conscious will enters the scene**

The somatic nervous system, SoNS or voluntary nervous system, is the part of the peripheral nervous system associated with skeletal muscle voluntary control of body movements. The SoNS consists of afferent nerves and efferent nerves. Afferent nerves are responsible for relaying sensation from the body to the central nervous system (CNS); efferent nerves are responsible for sending out commands from the CNS to the body, stimulating muscle contraction; they include all the non-sensory neurons connected with skeletal muscles and skin.

Amy Matthews from YogaAnatomy says it nicely: “The ability to be present to yourself and the space around you is a balance of sympathetic, parasympathetic and somatic.”

## **Fight, Flight, Freeze**

The fight-or-flight response (also called the fight, flight, freeze, or fawn response [in PTSD], hyper-arousal, or the acute stress response) is a physiological reaction that occurs in response to a perceived harmful event, attack, or threat to survival. Animals (including humans) react to threats with a general discharge of the sympathetic nervous system, priming the individual for fighting or fleeing.

More specifically, the adrenal medulla (on top of the kidneys) produces a hormonal cascade that results in the secretion of adrenaline (catecholamines, especially norepinephrine and epinephrine). The hormones oestrogen, testosterone and cortisol, and the neurotransmitters dopamine and serotonin, also affect how organisms react to stress (but not all in same direction).



When we're so triggered that we're fully in the fight or flight (or freeze) mode, the “Amygdala hijack” has kicked in and for a little while we are not able to influence our behaviour through centering.

If we are too stressed or reactive, our neocortex; the part of our brain capable of creative thinking, positive risk-taking and self-reflection goes “off-line”. We suffer from what is called an amygdala hijack in which a lower part of our brain, also known as the reptilian brain, takes over for our safety. In this state we are ego-centric and not able to give others a sense of connection.

The well-known survival patterns fight, flight, and freeze kick in: stage fright and forgetting your point when the CEO suddenly turns his attention on you is an example of freezing. Your angry defensiveness when challenged in a meeting is a fight response. This is an unconscious and involuntary process. Our higher functions are often still aware, giving us an excruciatingly frustrating experience where we are aware of what we're doing, but we can't stop it.



We often use the terms fight, flight and freeze in one breath. Note that they belong to two different levels of (perceived) threat. Freeze kicks in when Fight-Flight has not worked or is not an option (being physically stuck for instance). Freeze is a shutdown of the system for energy and life preservation, heart rate and breathing slows dramatically.

**Misunderstanding: Careful! There are two very different “freeze” responses.**

In trauma literature we find the term “freeze” used as the third level of threat. Freeze here means the body shuts down completely. It is initiated by the dorsal branch of the vagus nerve (from the polyvagal theory).

There is however another “freeze”. It's when someone is triggered (physically or verbally), has loss of muscle tension, breaths in and holds (sometimes high shallow breathing continues), and a temporary absence of thoughts (e.g. blacking out during a presentation). This primary “freeze” I explain as a combination of fight-flight at the same time. So it is part of the second level of safety system not the more “primitive” third. There is lots of readiness for action, but no movement; like stepping on the gas and the brake at the same time. Often this happens for a moment before a fight or flight response happens and we could think of its evolutionary heritage as an animal taking the safest course of action (do nothing for a moment so a predator doesn't see you) until either fight or flight make sense.

Often when pushed further or harder a person will either go forward and into fight mode or backward into flight mode. Some will sequence fight after flight, meaning we only fight when we can't literally or metaphorically run. While this makes sense biologically in terms of energy investment and risk (fighting is dangerous), this seems to us not to be the case in the modern human context for some people. While there is a cross-cultural biological dimension to stress, in people there is room for some shaping of this and we have found over many hours of working with people, the rough correlations of difference (e.g. a fight or flight preference) with personality type, though it's complex as people may have opposite patterns to their more typical one under pressure. Much variance exists in what we could call “second level” responses that involve social interaction but that don't genuinely engage the pro-social affiliative system, likely learned when growing up to cover up more “primitive” fight or flight responses. In my experience, people who have this response can be needy, submissive, placating or overly concerned with managing appearances; “fake” and “fawn” responses we could say. We could go further into our patterns under stress and what our physical tensions and collapses show about our psychological patterns, but this is not the place (for more on that see Reichian body therapy, Wendy Palmer and other chapters of this book).

**Getting out of fight-flight and value of centering**

We can learn to recognise, prevent and recover from an amygdala hijack. To reduce the chances of getting off-centre in the first place, self-care in all its forms will help us: exercise, diet, relaxation, meditation. Mindfulness and other practice can help to raise the threshold of the amygdala hijack, thereby increasing the chances of functioning optimally

more of the time. See later section on baselines.

Because the higher brain functions are often temporarily powerless, our best chance for learning to recover is training to use centering practices where we shift our state in the body and allow this to influence brain function. When we're triggered or reactive (fight-flight response activated) we can use any of the hyper-arousal centring techniques presented here.

### **Influence of facial expression and posture on our state**

So not only do our feelings and thoughts influence our facial expression, it also works the other way round. A famously researched example is holding a pencil horizontally between your teeth so you are forced to "smile", it makes you happier (e.g. Laird).

Expansive postures, using extensor muscles instead of flexor muscles generally make us feel more confident, powerful and uplifted (Cuddy et al).

Closed postures, with lots of flexor muscles firing, generally makes us feel closed, separated, and under threat. Paradoxically they can feel comfortable because the body-mind favours what it's used to out of energy conservation and because it has apparently worked for us in the past since we're still alive. We are creatures of habit.

### **What probably happens during centering?**

There are many different centering techniques that we will outline below. Some work better for some people or for some situations and intentions. Let's make a few general connections to the centering techniques and the biological effect. Please note that these are general effects and it's not always scientifically clear yet why something works and if it works consistently.

Most centering involves straightening and lengthening the body thereby engaging the extensors. It also includes relaxing, softening of muscle tissue on the outside of our body thereby lessening the firing of the flexor muscles. This will send signals to the brain and can make us feel safer, more confident, uplifted and more connected to self and others.

Centering also often involves a conscious opening of awareness (visual and sometimes auditory and kinaesthetic) of the space around us. The fight-flight response has narrowed our perception to the perceived problem or threat. By putting our awareness consciously back on the space directly around us we "tell" our brain via the sensory nerves in the body that the threat is over and we can go back to normal mode. Essentially all hyper-arousal centring techniques are undoing the fight-flight response, and working with the "bi-directional" body-mind link outlined.

"Social centering" involves such things as thinking of a loved one, looking at friendly faces nearby, or imagining a source of inspiration. This often helps in relaxing the facial muscles and chest area, sending a strong message to our brain that not only are we safe, we are in social mode: connected and at ease. As social animals we are safest with the tribe.

## Biological aspect of the stress response

Image designed by jvnkfood

### Main sources and additional reading:

*"The Body Keeps the Score: brain, mind and body in the healing of trauma"* by Bessel van der Kolk, M.D.

*"The Polyvagal Perspective"* by Stephen W. Porges - *Biol Psychol.* 2007 February; 74(2): 116–143

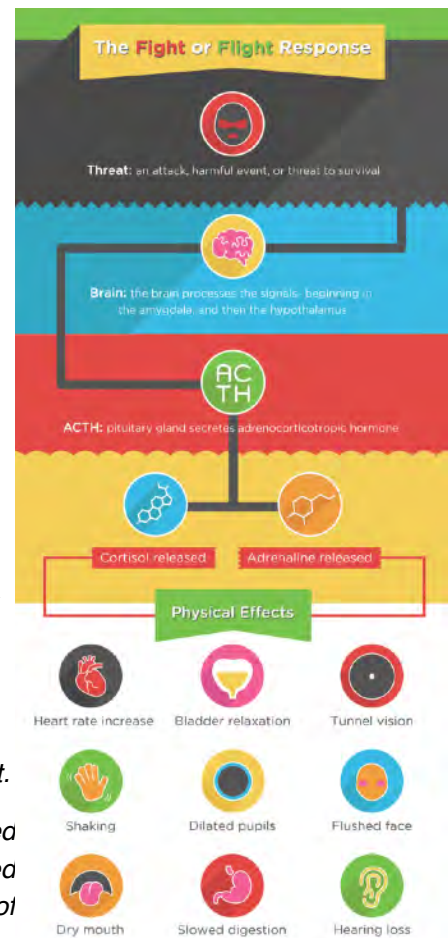
*"Leadership Embodiment: How the way we sit and stand can change the way we think and speak"* by Wendy Palmer and Janet Crawford. Mostly used Part II *"The Biology behind it all"* by Janet Crawford.

*"Applications of Embodiment in Organisation"* by Anouk Brack published in *Embodiment Journal* Volume 1

*"Beyond "Fight, Flight & Freeze": Nuances of the Nervous System."* by Amy Matthews in video on [yogaanatomy.net/beyond-fff](http://yogaanatomy.net/beyond-fff) (accessed 30 March 2016)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fight-or-flight\\_response](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fight-or-flight_response), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triune\\_brain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triune_brain), and other wiki pages on the subject.

*Embodied Cognition: A whole upcoming field of study called "embodied cognition" is interesting because it studies how cognition is embodied and how mind and body are intertwined. One of the driving forces of these studies is actually robotics.*



## Ways to Centre

So how do we quickly under pressure reestablish a state of grace to stay healthy, happy, sane, to be in optimal relationships, and be both ethical and effective?! This is the central question of centring. The "quickly under pressure" part is key here as centring techniques are not just relaxation techniques like say going for a whole yoga class or for an hour-long walk in the park, but tools that can be used quickly whilst in the midst of challenge. This is what makes them practical.

Here is my collection of centring tools from many practices from around the world, all of which have been thoroughly tried and tested with different groups, cross-culturally in a variety of practical situations. I would also love to have some academic research conducted on them. As it's surprisingly difficult to find data on what techniques are most effective, this would actually be a relatively easy study. The academic data that is available though is collected below too. While large individual differences exist in response only those techniques that we have found work with

the majority of people we have worked with (several thousand in most cases minimally) have been included, and we have labelled those we've found most consistently effective as "gold star" (★) techniques.

Centring techniques can be broadly divided into those that are useful in response to excess hyper-arousal - i.e. "relaxation centring", and those that combat hypo-arousal - i.e. "wake-up centring". Some techniques will actually work for both and we call these "dual centring" techniques. Centring can also be individually tailored as relaxation and wake-up centring are essentially crude generalised models and "true centring" is matched to suit the exact maladaptive reaction it is countering. On top of these basic types of physiological centring there are also techniques that work mostly with meaning and what we could call "depth" aspects, and those that are more utilising our social relationships (interpersonal aspects). Centring techniques can therefore be thought of as consisting of three fundamental approaches, though these may well be combined. This gives us the following distinctions which I'll flesh out in this chapter and give numerous examples of each:

1. Direct embodied intrapersonal centring

- relaxation centring methods
- wake-up centring methods
- dual centring methods
- true individually-adapted centring

2. Depth intrapersonal centring

3. Interpersonal centring

## **DIRECT EMBODIED CENTRING TECHNIQUES**

### **- USING THE BODY TO REGULATE - CATEGORY 1**

## **Relaxation Centring**

*Hyper-arousal antidotes (down-regulation techniques to reduce "fight-flight")*

Simply telling yourself to relax is not specific enough to be useful - it lacks "a how". The following techniques help people to reduce unpleasant and ineffective hyper-arousal - overstimulation from the sympathetic nervous system. Try them and see



what works for you. Note that relaxing can bring back access to emotions so go easy with them if you have a stressful life or past trauma - go slowly, trying a technique or two a few times a day until you're established with them.

I have marked with a ☆ techniques I've found particularly helpful.

### **Out-breath ☆**

Focus your attention on and slightly lengthen the out-breath. Simple. This is a yoga classic and now scientifically established through research as a stress reducer. Every out-breath is linked to the parasympathetic nervous system.

### **Smooth breath ☆**

"Smoothing out" the breath so any small stops or changes of pace are eliminated is also very effective for reducing stress. Paul Linden calls this "seamless breathing" and is a great technique, though requires some practice so isn't always the best one to teach body-mind beginners.

### **Concave spine☆**

Shaping the spine to a slightly concave (flexed) shape will be relaxing. This can be subtle (and isn't slumping) and done in any position.

## Core relaxation ★

The muscles of our bodies are connected like threads in a spiders's web, so tension and relaxation tends to spread. By relaxing the muscles of the central core the rest of the body will follow. It is also linked to out breathing and spine, both of which are critical. I tend to start at the top and work down relaxing the following areas. It can help to tense them first when you are learning and then undo that tension.

- Eyes - Release the eyes and the "ocular band" of muscles around the head. Activate your peripheral vision.
- Tongue - Let your tongue hang loose in your mouth and your jaw be soft - your lips just closed or slightly open. Say "ahhh" internally or out loud like you were lying back in a nice hot bath and relax your throat.
- Chest - Let the muscle of the front of the chest relax down and in. If you don't know how to do this think of someone you love and it will likely happen (see "smiling heart technique").
- Abdominals - If we have a soft tummy (i.e. our abdominal muscles are not contracted like on the magazine covers) like a cat or a baby, we can breathe with the diaphragm which is natural, healthy and relaxing. If we are "sucking in" - i.e. tensing these "stomach" muscles, we are encouraging fear and aggression. The belly and lower back should go out slightly as you breath in if the abs are relaxed. Visualising your breath going down to below your belly button can help as can learning to do this by lying on your back and putting a hand or an object on your tummy (a toilet roll or set of keys for example) and pushing it up as you breath in.<sup>6</sup>
- Lower abdominals - Relax right down to your genitals! The pelvic floor muscles you use to not wet yourself when you need to go to the toilet, are important to relax - unless of course you really do need to go :-). Let your pelvic floor (balls/vagina) hang loose, and there's no point in any of us being a "tight arse" :-). With many clients I don't know well we'll just say, "relax your lower abdominals" until they get the point, as not everyone is relaxed about having their "private parts" referred to.
- Feet - Relax "into" the floor to let it support you by undoing any clenching in the toes and soles.

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<sup>6</sup> according to some CPR first-aid teachers I trained with who have observed the breathing of tens of thousands of people around the UK, around 50% of people do not "belly breath" effectively meaning they are likely in a mild but constant state of anxiety/aggression, the ideal state for consumerism and social control to flourish. An experienced yoga teacher I know claims far more women suck in their bellies than men, one might guess due to media influence, though I see this in both men and women increasingly.



A colleague sometimes talks about the "five diaphragms" - the three internal ones of the throat, thoracic diaphragm and pelvis floor, and the more metaphorical top of the head and soles of the feet.

*NB: If I have only a few seconds to help someone relax I usually suggest tongue or belly relaxation as my most effective techniques. These were taught to me by Paul Linden who has influenced much of my thinking in this book.*

### **Grounding** ★

As James Brown said: "Get on down!" "Grounding" is a somewhat vague term for some very effective centring techniques. It comes down to these specific actions:

- Feel your feet (move them or wiggle toes if you need to do this. Getting interested in the areas of contact also helps – "What impression would I make on sand with my feet now?") Bringing your attention down will often lower stress which somatically is usually "up" as is "uptight".
- Lower your centre slightly by bending your knees a little, feeling yourself do this.
- Scan your body and relax any muscles not needed for holding you up (standing or sitting), e.g. teen shoulder muscles.
- Supportive visualisations. E.g. Imagine Star Wars type "energy" going down your body through your legs in the ground, having a large dinosaur tail, your legs (and butt if you're sitting) as tree roots extending far below, or sticky gooey chocolate or thick honey melting down your body helping everything relax (this last one works great for me but also makes me hungry!). Stroking down from others helps too if you've got a friend handy, and if not just imagining it works.

### **Just pause** ★

One of the simplest and best centring techniques I know of in our rushed world is just to pause for a moment. Much of the rest like breathing more deeply and balancing one's posture will follow naturally.

### **Postural balancing**

Using the postural balancing techniques discussed in chapter three will enable the muscles to relax as the bones carry more weight, making you feel calmer.

- When standing sway on your feet and settle back to the middle point between left and right foot and balls and heels of the feet.
- When sitting find your sit bones with your attention and ensure you are not leaning on yourself or a chair. Uncross your legs/feet and plant your feet on the floor.

### **Centre awareness**



Simply putting your attention in/on your centre of gravity around ten centimetres (3 inches ) below your navel in the centre of your body will make you more centre physically, mentally and emotionally. This is partly a visualisation for many. Video search "ki aikido testing" for various demonstrations of how this increases people's stability.

### **Heart stroking and self-soothing**

When people are really traumatically stressed like in some psychiatric hospitals and war-zones they will rub themselves, hold themselves and rock backwards and forwards. These are all instinctive forms of self-soothing, and while I hope it doesn't go this far for most readers more moderate versions can be consciously used. Rocking and settling on your feet can be one way - see postural alignment. Wendy Palmer teaches my favourite self-soothing technique which is to rub the hands together and then stroke from the heart to the hara (belly), which gives the feeling of moving anxiety down. People will naturally do this stroking on the backs of others in distress but it's hard to reach your own back and the front is just as good. These techniques are however not always socially acceptable to employ publicly, so only just qualify as "centring".

### **Releasing the Hands and Feet**

Many people find that when they are stressed they make fists of having "clutching" claw-like hands and feet. In some elderly or traumatised people this has become near-permanent.

- Tense and then let go of your hands and feet. Do this three times breathing out as you relax (a good general rule too). After the third relaxation relax again without tensing first.

### **General Tense and Relax**

It is often difficult for people to relax where they are holding muscular tension because they may have been doing it for so long they have gotten used to it and it is under unconscious control, and tension is a natural anaesthetic on top of this. One way around this is actually to tense more which brings feeling back and awareness of the muscular groups being used habitually to do the same thing. This is the exaggeration and contrast principle again.

- Short version - Tense your whole body while holding your breath for a few seconds. Quickly scan top to toe making sure you are not missing any areas, then stop doing this and breath out with a sigh.

- Longer version. Work up or down the body tensing and relaxing one group at a time, e.g. starting with the toes, then feet, then calves, etc. Take 10-30 min for the whole body. This systematic relaxation is a traditional stress management tech-

nique and there are audio recordings of people talking you through it available online. It's not good in the middle of life stress. However, it can be useful after work or to help you sleep.

NB - *Learning to contract opposing muscle groups like a body builder on show does take some skill. If you have trouble with an area it can be useful working with resistance - e.g. if you can't flex your biceps put your hand under a table and lift up to get the feeling, or on top of the table and push down for triceps (the opposing group on the other side). Walls, weights and helpful friends can be used to enhance effort and make "getting the feel" of a muscle easier.*

### **Squirm and Settle + a note on "bottom-up" techniques**

Many tensions in the body-mind can be quickly eliminated through a very natural (and potentially delicious) "squirm and settle". Simple move your body in any way that feels good, wriggle and relax for a moment. Follow the pleasure of ease like a cat in the sunshine might. This may sound obvious but many people have gotten out of this animal habit or are embarrassed to do it. This is a "bottom-up processing" centring technique in many ways. Often I am quite wary to just say, "follow what feels good" as this often equates to "follow unhelpful but comfortable habits", but on a more subtle level the feeling of ease is what you're looking for in many techniques; for example, aligned posture will have a grace and lightness to it, not a rigid feel.

### **Bilateral Tapping**

Slowly, gently and rhythmically tapping one side of your body (e.g. on knees, or hands up and down) for a few minutes is very relaxing for many people. There is a version of the well established trauma therapy EMDR which relies upon this. It may be effective due to brain hemisphere integration.

### **Water**

The act of swallowing is relaxing and taking a mouthful of cold water and following the sensation down into you as you swallow it can be centring; it is best when combined with postural adjustment. Emerging the face in cold water for a few seconds is a good emergency technique that stimulates what is known as the "dive reflex" that lowers the heart rate.

### **Peripheral vision/hearing ★**

A very easy and effective relaxation technique is to "open" your peripheral vision up. This is incompatible with the stress response (as are all these techniques). Develop the sense of "letting vision come to you" rather than reaching out for it. If this

makes no sense think of a time you were relaxed and happy looking far away at a beautiful panorama, this is the feeling. There are various small muscle groups involved which in time you can feel and relax directly. My colleague Adrian Harris calls this technique "owl eyes" and we touched upon it earlier in the section on external centring. You can also "open" your hearing by listening all around in an expanding sphere of awareness, nothing noises on all sides and trying to hear all around (even below you). It has been noted that modern life often involves staring ahead at a screen/road and that this reduces our capacity for inclusivity, which is more horizontal than a goal-orientated forwards orientation.

- Look at a point. Now allow your eyes to relax and see left and right up and down while keeping your gaze ahead. You can use the hands to help by moving them out either side slowly as if you were opening curtains and checking that you are aware of them both at once.

### **Visualisations**

I will say more about these in later chapters but here are a few for now that are good to use standalone as alongside other centring techniques:

- You can recall a safe place you have been in your life - somewhere with only positive associations; perhaps a beach you went to on holiday or an old family home.
- Imagine a clear cool mountain lake or other serene body of water (I think of a sunrise over the Dead Sea I experienced in Israel once with the wind gently pushing by ear and cheek - involve all the senses). You can also combine this with the body such as imagining a pond in your centre reflecting the moon on a still night.
- Imagine sucking the stress and anxiety from your body into a ball - what colour, shape sound and feel does it have. Collect it all up and throw it into space watching it explode like a fire-work then dissipate into nothing. This can be a lot of fun.
- We have already mentioned some visualisations to help with a down feeling. Up and out visualisations are covered in the techniques for hypo-arousal.
- Colours can help some people. Imaging your whole body coated in a colour for example or that you're breathing it in or out.

### **Darkness**

Some people find darkness relaxing. You could try standing in the broom-cupboard for a minute for example! Closing the eyes for a few moments helps many people, though this is not really a centring technique as it can't be applied under pressure where you need to see and respond.

## The Space Between

Despite physics telling us that we and the world is mostly space we tend to focus on “the stuff” we can see and what we are doing. This “illusion of solidity” is habitual and what can be more relaxing is focusing on all the space around us. This is also inspired by Wendy Palmer Sensei which also has a Zen/ Taoist tone.

- Take a moment to notice all the nothing around you enclosing the stuff. Imagine all the space within you - between cells and within molecules (99/9%+ space). Explore what “being spacious” means to you.

## Art, Aesthetic Appreciation and Creativity

Any kind of beauty whether it be visual, auditory/musical, tactile or gustatory can have a relaxing effect. Appreciating beauty and being involved in a creative process can be tremendously centring.

- Stop and smell the roses. Really enjoy that piece of chocolate. Stroke the cat. Have a doodle for one minute and see what you create. Look for the beauty around you.



## Listening

Listening deeply is a centring practice. I particularly like striking a chime or using a Tibetan singing bowl and then “following” the sound into silence and listening “to” that. With repetition you can condition yourself so you relax deeply at the sound of the bell or whatever - Pavlov’s mediator. There is actually always a subtle very quiet sound in the ear and this is very relaxing once you can find it (on monastic retreats or in other very quiet places it seems quite loud!). Stephen Porges research on the vagus nerve points to the involvement of the ear with relaxation.

## Sound Centring - Sigh, Om and Ahh

Making certain noises helps us relax. There are esoteric schools which have made an art of this and various spiritual and religious traditions using sound exist from every major faith from Gregorian chant to Shinto sound-syllables.

- Simply saying “ahhhh” as if you were settling into a hot bath is one, “laaaa” is similar.
- The word for “yes” in your first language is often helpful.
- The classic Indian “Om” works for many people, though some say any humming will do!
- Notice what sounds you associate with relaxation and make when you relax.

- Even imagining saying one of these sounds will set-up a relaxing body-mind state at times when you'd get looked at funny for having a good sigh! See Dylan Newcombe's Uzazu system for more on sound and embodied states.

### **Relaxing Words**

Words have associations and saying relaxing words to yourself like "peace", "relaxing" and "calm" has a noticeable effect for many people. Find one that works for you, it might be "stillness", "ease" or something with a personal association like "sea" or "horse". The point here is not that you're telling yourself to relax but that you're tuning into your physical association with the word.

### **Softening the knees**

Often when people are tense their knees "lock" (hyper-extend to maximum range). Without bending the knees very much, "softening" them so they are not locked. Sometimes it's easier to lock them first. A standing only technique obviously.

### **A note on Kinaesthetic, Auditory and Visual**

These centring exercises include kinaesthetic (bodily), auditory (involving words and sounds) and visual methods (using the eyes and visualisation). While centring is primarily kinaesthetic as it is the bodily reactivity that needs addressing, visual and auditory methods work well for some people. While debated it seems we all have our preferential "sensory modalities" and it is worth finding out what your preference is; for example, noting how you use language.

### **Eyes Open or Closed?**

Most kinaesthetic and auditory centring techniques are easier with the eyes closed to disable the attention grabbing primacy of the visual sense and enable you to concentrate on the sound or sensation. Having the eyes closed however is less useful for life applications, so unless you are just starting or really having difficulties we recommend practising with eyes open. You need to be able to centre while having a conversation, driving, sitting in a meeting where it wouldn't be socially acceptable to close the eyes, etc., as do clients. The basic principle here is to make any centring technique easy enough to learn but quickly progress to more realistic conditions.

### **"Wake up" Centring**

*Hypo-arousal antidotes (up-regulation techniques to reduce "freeze, fold and fawn")*

There are slightly less techniques available to increase arousal and undo the hypo distress response as it is less well understood, and because we live in a stressed out hyper-aroused world so working with this has been a priority. For many of the people I work whose lives are so fast-paced it 's relaxation that is the critical issue, although there is often some numbing too as a result of blocking out the "loudness" of the over-stimulating modern world and trying not to feel unpleasant emotions. The following are a good start for undoing the "deadening" of hypo-arousal. My understanding of many of these has been influenced by Being In Movement (Paul Linden) and Moiaiku (a Danish body practice).

### **In-Breath ★**

Focus on and slightly lengthen the in-breath. Simple. The in-breath is linked to the sympathetic nervous system.

### **Chest breathing ★**

To relax breathe with the belly, but to energise breathe so your chest moves and expands. Think of a passionate time with a lover, or when you were angry, or inspired, and your chest was heaving up and down, this is what I mean. Even a few breaths like this can really wake you up. This "fire breathing" technique can be really powerful and it is not recommended for people with heart conditions or high blood pressure. It can make anyone a bit dizzy so be careful and I don't recommend doing it more than occasionally, nor for more than five breaths at a time.

### **Convex spine★**

Shaping the spine to a more convex (extended) shape will be stimulating. This can be subtle and done in any position.

### **Pushing and Pulling ★**

A hypo or collapse response can feel very disempowering. The solution to this is to feel the strength of muscular action in your body by pushing and pulling. This will also help you feel your boundaries and general sense of "being there" - solid and real. You can use weight training, gym equipment, walls and other objects for this however this is sometimes not practical so we recommend the following:

- Plant the feet and without moving them pull in and then push out with your legs, activating the inner thigh and outer thigh muscles respectively. This can be done without anyone noticing, sitting or standing.
- If you are alone or don't mind being seen you can clasp your hands together as if you were clapping. First pushing and then pulling, activating the chest and triceps and the biceps and back muscles. Feeling the muscles and connecting this to personal empowerment is key.

The sound that goes with these movements either out loud or internally is a gutsy “urgggghh” - as if you were a cave-man pushing a heavy car.

### **“Ujii” Breath/ growling**

One from yoga. Breathe like Darth Vader making a sound by partially closing the glottis, this will make a sound like the tides coming and going (keep it smooth). Continue for a minute or two. This is easy to find on Youtube. While it may seem unusual, growling quietly can also be stimulating. Both of these techniques may be embarrassing to do publicly and takes a few minutes, as does the next one from yoga, which isn’t ideal for centring techniques, though they do work well.

### **Belly bellows (Kapalbhati/shining skull)**

Another from yoga. Push air out of your body by suddenly contracting the abdominal muscles, and let air come back in passively. Both through the nose. Repeat this twenty times, but stop if you feel light-headed or dizzy, as with all these techniques. This is a greater energiser and tends to warm people up. It can also be a relaxing way to relate tension in the diaphragm. This is also easy to find on Youtube.

### **Scan and Compare**

The problem with numbing is that it’s hard to spot as you can’t feel the numb areas! It’s like a school teacher listening for the quiet kids in a class. One solution to this is compare parts and sides of the body to spot the ones with less “life” and then bring more awareness there through attention.

- Scan you body comparing left and right, front and back, up and down. Where you find an area that you feel less, spend some time resting your attention there. Get curious about the sensations there rather than just imagine the area.

### **Gentle Movement and Touch**

Doing a gentle body movement routine such as the one found in our EFC body awareness form video available free online will bring awareness to hypo-aroused areas, as will a good general yoga or other mindful movement routines. Gentle movement can be used to bring awareness, which then brings a feeling of “aliveness” to any area identified using the scan and compare method as can gentle touch. Touch can also be used while washing to see what areas are less present. It’s important that touch and movement be very slow and light when used in this way. These are more body awareness developing techniques than in the moment “centring” techniques, but they can be employed in short form as such.

### **Tapping**



Making a soft fist with the thumb on the top and gently tapping the whole body is a great way to bring life to numb areas. You can be more rigorous on more muscular and yang parts and just use open-palms or finger-tips on more sensitive areas such as the face, hands and head. Remember to tap around the body's centre and you may also want to rub the front of the chest over the heart. Tapping is one of my favourite ways to wake up when I'm sleepy.

### **Jumping up and down!**

When we want to quickly raise our heart and breathing rates to energise ourselves, we work our weight against gravity and jump up and down! While not strictly centring it will wake you up. A gentler version is to bend the knees up and down, or move your heels up and down, to bounce without leaving the ground.

### **Heel Landing**

Stand on tip-toes and then suddenly drop down onto your heels. Feel the shudder through your body and allow your system to settle. This is also a good way of bringing awareness to the bottom of the body when your stress is "up", so can also be calming.



### **Feeling Your Spring**

Our bodies natural springiness mentioned earlier in the chapter is a good thing to get in touch with to counter general hypo-arousal. Doing a little jump or just bending the knees and feeling the bounce back or having a friend push down on your shoulders from above to do the same also works.

### **Ear Massage and Face Stretch**

Massaging the ears with the fingers and stretching out the facial muscles by making all sorts of silly expressions like yawning like a lion and sticking your tongue out is a fun way to become present again. Press and rub around the eyes and the bridge of the nose. I use this when teaching kids who are sleepy. People instinctively rub their faces when tired and this is just an extension of this.

### **Non-Injurious Pain**

If you're having trouble staying present, try stimulating one of your body's painful but not damaging "pressure points" where nerves are close to the surface. Pinching with thumb and forefinger just in from the webbing of the hand between the other thumb and forefinger works for most people. If it doesn't use your thumb to

“hook” just under your jaw-bone on the same side as the hand you’re using and you should find another delightfully painful one. I only recommend using this and similar intense “wake-up” methods occasionally and spending time developing more subtle anti-hypo-arousal skills too. The [Wake up video](#) is available on the Integration Training Youtube site regarding pressure points.

### **Visualisations**

There are many visualisations possible to reduce hypo-arousal and as ever it’s an individual matter. Here’s a favourite:

- Imagine you are on a sun-bed and your whole body is being warmed by the sun to an internal glow. Imagine the blood inside of you bringing life and warmth to every part. Now visualise stepping out of the sun-bed and hundreds of butterflies kissing your whole body with little wet lips. Next you step outside and a cool breeze wafts across your whole body leaving you refreshed.
- Another classic is to imagine you are a star, angel, light-bulb, glow-worm's butt or anything else that radiates light in all directions. This is also effective for dual centring postural balancing.
- Imagining bright colours like red and daffodil yellow are often stimulating.

### **Tree pose**

One way to bring focus is to challenge your balance. This means you have to pay attention here and now, and will often be mildly stimulating. [Yoga “tree-pose”](#) or similar is one way to play with this. It can be done subtly when standing without looking too weird.

### **Imagined lift**

When you pick up a heavy object you use the strong core muscles around your centre. Just imagining you are about to will also engage these and make you feel stronger. Imagining swallowing a bowling ball will have a similar effect (courtesy of Paul Linden).

### **Exercise - try one**

Try one of the simpler wake-up centring techniques when tired

## Dual Centring Techniques

Some centring techniques will regulate both sympathetic hypo and hyper-arousal. This may sound like a contradiction but it's quite possible.

### Finding balance ☆

Balancing and aligning the structure of the body as has been described in chapter three is useful. It's easier to be relaxed when your bones can transfer the load of gravity into the planet; postural muscles are not unduly stressed and it is not easy to fall asleep when you are upright! Of course you may want to emphasise either the awakening (up) or relaxing down sides of posture (down) and having a nice lie-down can be very effective if circumstances allow and no alertness is needed! This is a dual technique as we may need more up, down, forwards, backwards or whatever to come into balance physically and emotionally.



### Awareness/Intentional Balancing ☆

This techniques requires that you learn the skills of balancing your awareness around you and "reaching out" with your intention, which will inevitably be followed by balancing micro-movements of the body.

- Ask yourself, "Is my awareness balanced? If it were a shape would it be a sphere or squashed at the back on one side (we tend to be overly front-focused). What would it be like to balance and extend this sphere in all directions? Remembering what is behind you for example can help but it is having attention behind you that is important. This is the "force field" exercise from chapter two.
- "Reach out" with your intention, downwards first; use a visualisation like dropping an anchor or our light-sabre from earlier aimed down to help if needed. Now reach up, then forwards, then back, then to each side. These directions can also be combined as vertical, sagittal and horizontal dimensions. Now feel yourself reaching in all directions at once; the sphere again. NB: people may or may not intuitively know what "reaching out" means and may first have to be taught it via a handshake or similar, landing to notice the intently movement that proceeds any physical movement. See Paul Linden's books for more on this.

For relaxation you may want to reach out more down and back, and for energising more forwards and up, as we tend to get "up-tight" when hyper-aroused and slump down when we have less energy.

### Move differently ☆

This technique is so simple I'd be reluctant to include it if it didn't work so well. Just as the way we move expresses how we are it also creates how we are. So if you want to change your state simply move differently. This is so straightforward that we usually just ask people to work intuitively as most will understand walking slower helps them calm down, and speeding up to wake up for example!

Sometimes I use models like the four elements or Laban movement patterns, or imagine people we would like to be more like in that moment. There are some specifics like pushing from back foot and moving the arms more to walk/be more confident, moving from the belly or heart to activate more stability or emotion, moving the hips more to add more sensuality and flow, feeling the top of the head and moving more on the front of the foot to add lightness, feeling the feet and "planting each step" to add stability, we could go on, but I think it's better that you experiment with this yourself.



### **Targeted imagery★**

This technique is from The Alexander Technique and verges on true third category centring but uses one method; that of imagery. It works by identifying an image associated with FFFF response and then making a counter image. For example, you may feel as if you have a "hard tight ball" in your stomach when scared. You then imagine the ball becoming soft, expansive and made of light to counter this. This is close to true individually adapted centring but using imagery.

### **Stand Differently**

Much of what we have said applies to movement, and also applies to standing. You can play with the weight variables like widening the stance and the direction your palms are facing and shoulders rolled.

### **Inward and outward facing**

We have noticed that having the toes facing in and shoulders rolled to match tends to make us more introverted and reflective (and we also see this pattern in introverts more often).

### **Contrasting Limp, Extended and Tense**

This can be done with the whole body or just one part of the body like a hand. Tense your body/body part, then let it go totally floppy (like the tense and relax exercise) then extend it like you're reaching out. Do this several times; the comparison will enable you to find a healthy middle-ground. We sometimes joke by showing a limp hand, a tense fist and then an extended hand as if waving or giving, that this is all we teach with embodiment.

### **Centre Moving**

Moving around or from your physical centre and then letting this movement settle helps many people "find" their centre and relax. You can bounce the knees up and down while swinging the arms (vertical), turn the hips (horizontal) or put the feet at right angles, step forward and then bend one knee then the other (video search "tori fune" for this last one, or "aikido warm-up exercises" for all of them). As long as you are moving from the centre rather than the upper body which is usually more habitual at first, you will become more centred. You can start with large rigorous movements and then reduce them to stillness. For relaxation centring use slower gentler movement and for energising centring bigger and faster ones.

### **Shaking seeds**

Imagine your body is full of large seeds, lentils, dry beans or something similar. Now bounce and shake your body to move them around, loosening where they are stuck (tension) and "filling up" the areas that have none (numbing). This exercise is from the Ideokinesis system and would be a gold star technique as it's very effective were it not for the fact that it's hard to do without looking like a lunatic.

### **EFT and Acupressure Points**

While one may question the "energy" theory they use, there is some evidence that tapping on various point of the body (e.g. certain shiatsu/acupuncture points) can have a relaxing and stimulating effect. Much of this may just be down to the mindfulness that tapping anywhere on the body brings but there may be an extra effect.

### **4 Element centring**

As the elements is a key model I use in other work, I'll include a brief look at how we could view stress reactions in this light. Skip this part unless you're a student already and know the mode.

Often people will go deeper into their primary element pattern under pressure, though not always and this will often change with extreme or sustained pressure where people can flip to the other pole (e.g. from inflexible earth to ungrounded earth). As the elements can be seen as directions across the vertical and sagittal axis, going deeper into one will necessarily be unbalancing. In addition to this direction out from a literal and metaphorical centre, we can also see their negative influence on the tools of relaxation and structure in excess under pressure.

For centring, what this means is that someone having a what could be characterised as a fire response will need water centring. This is a simple map of matching centring to individual needs. See the table below:



Earth - down and tense - freeze. Needs more air as centring

Water - back and unstructured - flight or fawn. Needs more fire

Fire - forwards and tense - fight. Needs more water

Air - up and unstructured - flight (dissociative). Needs more earth

*NB: master embodiment teacher Stuart Heller has a lot more to say on this subject. Recommended.*

### **True individually-adapted centring**

An even more refined and individually adapted centring method is to see which of the fundamental aspects of embodiment have been disrupted and balance awareness, acceptance, intention, relaxation, structure, movement and responsiveness accordingly. You could view this through the FFFF lens or any other model. All centring techniques are essentially shortcuts and generalised solutions to this true art of centring. In essence all these techniques try in a crude way to disrupt the FFFF/grasping reaction by doing something else with the body, in a somewhat scatter-gun way. A more refined technique is to notice exactly what you are doing and replace it specifically!

For example, I may notice that when triggered I dip my head, tense my belly and shoulders and narrow my attention. I could then not do these things (called inhibition in Alexander Technique) or perhaps more helpfully, actively relax and expand in ways to specifically counter this pattern and are not compatible.

Hopefully the large number of options presented above will give you a sense of some of the principles involved and allow you to be creative, at least after some practice and assimilation if you are new to this work. Start with where you are and what you need, then match the methods you know to achieve your embodied goal. You are no longer a victim of circumstance and habit, you can change your state!

**Exercise - try it!**

*Give it a go. What do you need right now? Do it.*

**Exercise - how to start a fight**

*Have you ever had someone tell you not to worry or to calm down? It doesn't work does it? We can't just tell our biology what to do and words alone are weak. This is why we need centring. The same is true of asking others to calm down; for example when two friends are arguing. Your own state and consequential body language and tone of voice are more important than what you say in fact. When someone is in a fight-flight response they aren't thinking logically or feeling social (their hearing is actually worse on top of this). Both the rational and social engagement systems in the brain are effectively overridden. Now I can be quite provocative so let me invite you to look at this another way, just as a thought experiment. If you wanted to start a fight with someone what would you do, short of hitting them first? What state would you be best in yourself? How would you relate to them socially? What would your tone of voice be like? Knowing these things and not doing them accidentally is the key to both social centring and using centring for conflict resolution.*

## **Depth Centring Techniques**

### **- using meaning to regulate**

#### **Category 2**

So far we have discussed centring in terms of a simple up and down regulation model (hyper and hypo-arousal) and the eight body-mind aspects, using what could be described as the what, where, when and how aspects of being, or the three physical dimensions of the body and how we move through space. One can also "centre" in an extended sense of the word using "why" and "who" aspects of our being. To be disconnected from the depth of who we are and why we do what we do is actually at the root of being uncentred; though through the hypo



and hyper responses to this is the most concrete manifestation of the same thing. By reminding ourselves who we are, and what we are committed to, we gather and collect our scattered selves into a more functional unified whole. The physical body and the deeper aspects of ourselves have a bi-directional link.

I appreciate that this may seem somewhat esoteric for now, but it will likely become clear with experience. Centring on this level can have a depth that makes it a spiritual activity by many definitions, rather than just a physical way to trick biology. This area will be explored more later in the book in sections on leadership and influence, and for now I would recommend asking one or more of the following questions to centre yourself. For some people these are much more effective than simple category 1 embodied techniques, while others find them less accessible. You don't need to provide the definite answer. In fact, trying to do so may make you stressed. It's asking the questions that's important.



### **Depth centring enquiries**

- *Who am I, and how is that embodied here and now?*
- *What has meaning to me - ultimately and here?*
- *Why am I doing this?*
- *What do I most value - ultimately and here?*
- *What do I serve - ultimately and here?*
- *For the sake of what? (a favourite of Richard Strozzi-Heckler)*
- *What is my higher power and who is that embodied through me here and now?*
- *How can I be true to myself now?*

### **Depth reminders**

Meaning centring can also be done as simple statements such as:

- What matters to me is...
- What I'm committed to is...
- What I value is...
- Etc

Some people get on better with statements than questions and vice versa. This tends to have a yin (questions) and yang (statements) preference correlation.

Category 2 centring can also be done by reminding oneself of a critical image, phrase or posture that is key to who you are and what brings your life meaning. It can be religious, like making the sign of the cross. The critical thing in all of these category 2 methods is to reconnect with value and purpose.

### **Basic Enquiry Centring**

Enquiries can also be used as part of category 1 centring, Wendy Palmer for example will ask, "What would a little bit more ease (or any other quality) be like?" The "little bit" part comes from the idea that the body will accept small incremental changes more readily than big ones.

[More on centring and meaning here.](#)

*Credit: Richard Strozzi-Heckler is to my knowledge the person who developed meaning-based centring in this manner in the modern context, and Wendy Palmer who first started using enquiry centring.*

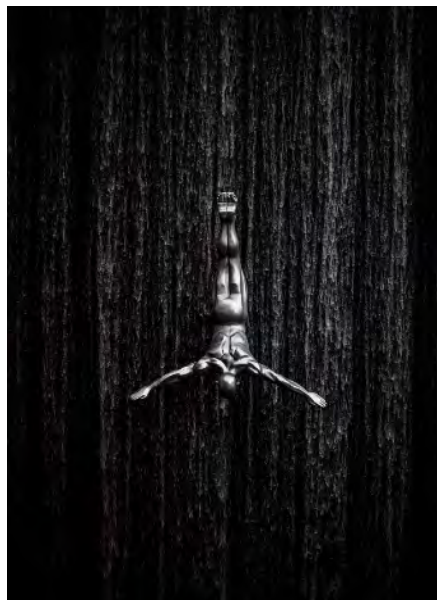
### **Interpersonal Centring Techniques**

#### **- using relationship to regulate**

#### **Category 3**

Interpersonal centring or "social centring" is a concept that I've been developing, which makes use of the social engagement system to reduce fight-flight-freeze-fold. As mentioned earlier in this chapter we are social animals and regulate ourselves primarily through social connection. This is very obvious really. If for example a baby cries, it does not start doing a breathing technique to calm its distress, as it is reliant upon others to soothe it. While as adults we can better self-regulate having (hopefully) learnt these skills, we are still soothed by social connection - empathy, touch, appreciation etc, and it's typical for emotionally developed adults to reach out to their community for support when in need. This human tendency is also the basis of what therapists call the "therapeutic alliance", the strength of which has been shown to be the critical factor in whether therapy is a success, not the style of therapy. I believe I am innovative in making extensive use of interpersonal connection as a short-term stress reduction strategy (i.e. as a centring tech-

nique) though others use small bits of this approach, and as mentioned it's central to many systems considering it as a longer timeframe or as the basis for effective learning (we learn best in safe supportive relationships). This approach is congruent with Stephen Porges model of stress and the myelinated vagus nerve being the



primary parasympathetic system. As with pleasure centring, making use of this interpersonal soothing in centring has however largely been ignored, as it's either considered a long-term stress reduction capacity or missed entirely by traditions such as martial arts which use a one against one, or one against many, combative model.

How then can we shift from a stress reaction to soothing social engagement quickly, even under pressure? Usually this is done by touch/proximity, sympathetic attention, coordinated movement and long verbal exchanges (think friendship or therapy) but these have limited value in the centring context

where techniques are needed under pressure and fast, by definition. There are however methods such as shifting our attention to where there is nourishing social connection in the present moment. There is often some, or in a persons extended social context or past if not. I developed this notion while on an extended tour in many countries for work, where I was removed from my social support network and frankly a bit stressed and lonely for a considerable period of time. Sitting on *another* plane by *another* person I didn't know, it occurred to me that this person was a human just like me, that they were basically respectful and considerate of me in that moment, and seemed friendly enough generally. While not the same as a hug from an old friend for example, this shift of awareness and framing, which only took a moment, was noticeably helpful to my state, so I started to develop this happy accident into a set of techniques.

Note that the calming effect of social engagement applies to both distress and eustress. Twelve-step addiction recovery programs like Alcoholics Anonymous rely upon creating a sense of belonging to reduce cravings as well as to reduce distress from withdrawal. Incidentally they also rely upon category 2, helping people develop a "higher power" to help them regulate.

## Some social centring techniques

Here are some specific methods you can employ to socially reduce your FFFF or grasping response, but any technique that connects you to others and your sense of being socially supported will work, so be creative.

### **ABC - Acceptance, Belonging, Care**



The first of two alphabetically-styled techniques, this one focuses on relationship and reducing FFFF with the social engagement system. In this case you look for how you are accepted/safe, or at least not actively rejected, how you belong with who you are with (look for what you have in common with people) and if there are signs of care or at least consideration or non-violence.

This is a matter of focusing one's attention on the pro-social aspects of any interpersonal dynamic. In any moment this could be from a friendly allied face that's present (this is easiest and I use it in groups as facilitator or when doing a talk), or even on a less friendly person but focusing on the positive in the relationship. Where there is conflict or interpersonal hostility, it is still possible to look for what is healthy in the relationship at that moment, or reminding oneself of the bigger picture.

### **SPIRAL - Support, Passion, Inspiration, Respect, Appreciation, Love**

There are times when we can't find something positive in the moment because we are too far into a conflict, things seem to bleak and there are no allies present. In order to engage the pro-social soothing systems at times that feel fundamentally unsafe socially, it's necessary to remember those in the past or those elsewhere now who gave/give us love and support. To imagine and remind ourselves of those that inspire us close and far, those who give us respect, trust and appreciation, and relationships of passion that invigorate us (the last one is useful if in a hypo-arousal response particularly). It is not necessary to remember all aspects of SPIRAL and it doesn't matter if you add in any of the social ABC ones as any of these will be useful. The SPIRAL ones can also be found in the moment with someone who is a trigger for stress but as they are deeper (love not just care for example) this can be a bit more of an ask!

In some cases people find it hard to think of anyone in their present or past who has been or is supportive. This is rare if people really consider it, but you can also go to the future for help. The question then becomes - How might such relationships develop? How is it possible that you WILL be supported?

Like all centring techniques SPIRAL gets easier with time and external supports can be used. Wendy Palmer for example uses the "I" part of this and gives students cards with inspirational figures on such as the Dali Lama, Mother Theresa or MLK to help them remember their inspiration.

### **Imagined touch**

Imagining a supportive hand on your back or other area that feels helpful from someone can be both calming and invigorating.



### **Smiling heart - how we love**

A technique from Paul Linden I have been using over ten years is smiling heart. It's quite simple; just "think of someone who makes your heart smile" - Paul's instruction. Feeling the body and allowing and encouraging the warm expansive physical sensations of care/love/affection, the softening sensations of the chest, the opening of peripheral vision etc. is also helpful. This technique is a short-cut into love, a method for being able to identify and then create from choice the embodiment of care. As a child I was rejected the instruction in my Christian upbringing to "love thy neighbour" as it was lacking a clear "how", but this simple technique helps to create a body-mind pro-social state instantaneously, which is both useful in and of itself, as well as providing an opportunity to study how we do love as a set of actions in the body, so we can replicate this under pressing circumstances.

NB: *Wendy Palmer likewise uses the simple accessible, "think of someone who makes you smile". Note this is not "think of someone you love" or similar, as we can love people we actually have quite unhelpful responses to.*

#### **Exercise:**

*Try the smiling heart technique and notice what you do in your body. What are the concrete steps you take to love! Which of these can you activate yourself consciously?*

### **Smiling at strangers**

Now this one has to be used with common sense and cultural sensitivity, but in many instances it's possible to smile and make brief eye-contact with strangers,

who will normally smile back if you're not overdoing it or in a grossly inappropriate environment, to feel the positive influence of social connection.

***Some examples of social centring in use:***

*Someone asks me a challenging question in a workshop in a clearly hostile tone. I notice my jaw tighten and a mild "fight" reaction begin, which will not be helpful in responding kindly and skilfully. (Note the importance of body awareness here as ever). I look for one moment to the friend hosting this workshop who is smiling supportively and I make brief eye contact. I feel myself relax and turn to address the questioner.*

*I'm arguing with my partner around a cultural difference between us (we're from different countries). I notice an unhelpful state has developed and apply a little belly relaxation (aspect 1), remind myself what matters is the relationship (aspect 2) and that my partner loves me and we have this in common (and combination of B from ABC social centring and L from SPIRAL). This example is more unstructured than the forms we have presented here. This is typical of people who have been centring for many years and tend not to do things so "by the book" anymore.*

[More on social centring here.](#)

## The Principles of Centring

So far we have introduced centring techniques in their purest forms, and when beginning it can be wise to practice them this way so as to not confuse them. In reality however we often teach and practice composite forms which cover several aspects at once for greater effectiveness with ourselves and others.

### **Alphabet Centring - Awesome Best Centring Devised Ever!**

One simple one I use a lot on EFC and shorter business courses is ABC:

**A** - Aware - feel your body here and now

**B** - Balanced - balance your posture, expansive awareness and intentional reaching



**C** - Core relaxed - relax your eyes, jaw, belly, genitals

**D** and **E** can be added for more hypo-responses: Definitely, Energised. This involves using the shining star visualisation or emphasising the reaching-out part more to find a state of expansiveness.

The full version is the immodestly named the Awesome Best Centring Devised Ever, and is a distillation of some of the most effective classic layer 1, 2 and 3 centring techniques from around the world. It is best done after practising the gold star techniques individually as it incorporates them. It takes about 3 minutes when done in full and can be used in 3-5 seconds with practice. It can be done standing, sitting or in any other posture, although upright is preferable. I have totally cheated with the letters to cram in all the good stuff. If you just do a bit of it that's okay, it will still work as long as you do some relaxing (anti-hyper) and awareness and gently stimulating (anti-hypo) parts. ABCDE can stand for:

A - Aware and Accepting

B - Balanced, Boundaried and Breathed

C - Core relaxed, Connected to Care and Creative imagery

D - Definitely here, Definitely relaxed and Defiantly shiny

E - Elegantly Effortlessly Energised with Ease

- **Aware** – Put your feet flat on the floor and put anything in your hands down. Be mindful of the present moment using the five senses, especially feeling the body, your weight on your chair/ feet and your breath. Scan up and down the body with your attention and remember to include the back. Notice what you can see, hear, smell and taste.
- **Accepting** - It's all good. Start where you are, saying yes to whatever is.
- **Balancing** – Balance your posture and attention. Relax down so your bones not muscles support your weight. Now make sure you are floating up from the back of the head so you keep alert. Balance both sides and make sure you are not squashed or leaning more on one foot or hip. Balance front and back so you are self-supporting and not leaning on yourself or your chair. Have an expansive feeling of "reaching out" in all directions.
- **Boundaried** - Feel your skin boundaries and use the "pushing and pulling" technique if feeling spacey, unconfident or disempowered.
- **Breathed** - Let yourself be breathed. Then lengthen the in-breath to the chest to enliven or out-breath after breathing into the belly to relax, as appropriate.



- **Core Relaxed** – Relax your eyes, mouth/tongue/jaw, stomach and back muscles - breathe deeply with your diaphragm so your belly and lower back move out slightly as you breath in. You can tighten your abdominal muscles before you relax them if this helps. Focus on your physical centre of gravity, a point a few inches below the navel inside you. Relax the pelvic floor and the feet. This “core” or “centre-line” relaxation will spread to the rest of your body enabling the muscles to be as relaxed as your (now well balanced) structure allows.
- **Connected to Care** - Bring to mind the reason why you are doing this (for the sake of what?) and to other people or ideas you serve and who support you now and from the past (e.g. inspiring figures or mentors).
- **Creative Imagery** - Use an image and a word that will help. E.g. picturing a calm mountain lake and saying “calm”.
- **Definitely here, definitely relaxed** and **Defiantly** shiny - these three are checking you have done the boundaries, reaching and centre-line relaxation parts ensuring hyper and hypo-balance.
- The result of all this is you may well feel **Elegantly** awesome and **effortlessly energised** with **Ease**. You may wish to anchor this state by saying your word again or making a simple gesture like connecting the thumb and forefinger so you can reengage it later more readily.

That was the long form to teach you everything you need to know to get yourself together whatever the pressure. It is however way too much to remember which is OK as it's centring overkill as mentioned! You can also memorise the following paragraph or write it on a piece of paper you keep in your wallet or on a smart phone note:

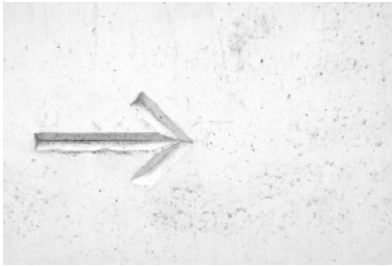
*I am **aware** of my body and **accept** what I find. I **balance** my structure and attention and intention out in all directions. I feel and reinforce my **boundaries**. I don't forget to **breathe!** I relax my tongue, tummy and whole **centre-line**. I **connect** to what I care about and people that support me, and to a clear **creative** image and word that helps. I check I'm **definitely** here, definitely relaxed and shine **defiantly**. I find ways to feel **elegantly** awesome and **effortlessly energised and at ease**.*

For more hypo responses ABC alone may be sufficient, and this is sometimes all we teach in shorter workshops.

The most advanced super short version is “**F**” which just stands for "Fuck it". See John Parkin's scholarly work on this subject.

### **Exercise - invent your own centring technique**

*I invite you to invent your own technique for centring. Combine and adapt ones here, perhaps include other techniques you know and things that are important to you; come up with an acronym you like, etc. This is something we do on the Embodied Facilitator Course as we find people remember better and are more committed to techniques they have creatively come up with themselves. Do not be a slave to someone else's form, especially if you are not a beginner in this work.*



## **Practicing centring intelligently - a guide to the principles of centring**

### ***Exercise - a mild experience of stress***

*The purpose of this exercise is to help you stress yourself out, but just a bit! As with all the exercises in the book if it feels too unpleasant stop and apply one of the simple relaxation centring exercises like soft belly. Start by closing your eyes and imagining a person, idea or situation that is irksome. Not really horrible or traumatic, just a bit annoying. We find that celebrities and politicians can be helpful if you are lucky enough not to have a coworker you find tricky. Family members are usually too challenging! Picture the person, thing, place or idea that you find bothersome, picture them/it as fully as possible, hear their voice if it's a person and the kind of things they say. Make the experience detailed and sensorially rich. Notice what you do in your body. Be specific.*

So far I have covered some theory about centring and offered many practical techniques, but not yet described how to develop your practice on the art of centring, so it can be applied well to your life. The key thing in this second half of the book is to see the principles of workings with centring so you can be adoptable, rather than being attached to techniques.

So far I have introduced centring techniques as stand alone tools, but practicing centring exercises in calm environments or as and when stressful things happen in life is not enough to develop transferable centring skills. In order to develop competence with reducing your distress or eustress response, you must centre under controlled and increasing levels of pressure. To centre with no pressure is too easy, and to do it under life's random strains can be too hard. The following methodology



can be used to provide appropriate challenge and develop your centring “muscle” in the same way you’d use increasing yet not overwhelming weights to build muscle mass. By building-up gradually (calibration) one can learn centring as a practice, then transfer it effectively to application in life. Practice vs application is therefore a critical distinction. What matters here is not so much the method of applying stressful stimuli, or the centring technique, but the principle of calibrating the former to work with the latter most effectively. These principles apply equally to your own practice and to teaching centring to others.

The basic centring development “algorithm”, also known as the “centring principle” is:

1. Apply a low-level stressor.
2. Increase in small steps if no reaction occurs until you elicit a FFFF or eustress reaction.
3. Study the reaction bringing awareness to its component parts.
4. Apply a centring technique aimed at reducing the reaction - e.g. ABC
5. Notice the new reaction (which will be less if the centring is successful).
6. Alter centring approach if not successful.
7. If reaction reduced successfully and FFFF or eustress response fully inhibited, increase stressor strength gradually until a FFFF occurs again and repeat from stage 3.

In this way skill in centring grows. A well design martial arts or yoga class can be used to practice this, or use of the stress progression programme outlined below. Permission should be used for each stage and step-up in stimulus strength in coaching others through this - more on this later. A fuller version of this algorithm, another gem from Paul Linden is at the end of the chapter.

Note the two parts of this process; awareness and choice, the heart of embodied work as ever, noticing the reaction and then managing it. Just practicing the first part is useful; noticing our reaction to stress. and we could have started the chapter by focusing on this aspect before teaching centring. Sometimes we teach

workshops just helping people identify when they are stressed by building body awareness of this. People already have their own state management resources and can then apply these, especially if you guide people into seeing exactly *how* they are “doing” stress in the body. It then becomes straightforward to undo this with only a little guidance.

This sequence is for developing your own skill and also working with clients. We recommend developing your own skill with centring for some months before teaching it.

### **Stressor progression**

It's important when learning to centre or teaching it to others to use an intelligent kind progression of intensity. What I mean by this is starting below the stress/eustress response threshold, then gradually progressing (with renewed consent with each step if leading someone else through it), until a noticeable but not overwhelming level of stimulation is reached. This is called “calibration” and is a vital idea to take on to learn and teach centring effectively. The point is not to get as far along any scale as possible right away, but to find the appropriate level to work at. You can also learn to notice subtler and subtler levels of arousal and manage them more completely. Naturally as people improve their centring skills and habituate to stimuli however, a greater level of stress is needed, due to both habituation and increased centring skill which is the point. While you never know what will be more stressful for someone, a typical progression or stress scale I might use with a client would look something like the escalation scale below - note *they* would choose to escalate not me, so they keep control:

1. Tissue throwing at belly<sup>7</sup>
2. Tissue throwing at face (far enough back not to seem like a punch)
3. Tissue throwing at face with mild shout
4. Tissue throwing at face with louder shout
5. Single handed wrist grab (no pull or push)
6. Two handed wrist grab (no pull or push)
7. Wrist grab from behind (no pull or push)
8. Shoulder grab from behind (no pull or push)
9. Shoulder grab from behind with shout (no pull or push)

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<sup>7</sup> this is a very safe place to start as few people have been traumatised by a Kleenex! NB “tissue” is British English for “Kleenex” if you're American.

10. + various extreme measures suitable onto for martial artists and military personnel  
it's best not to indulge here

Details on using these stressors are outlined below and [a video showing them is here.](#)

Verbal triggers such as harsh words can also be calibrated using the words tone, volume and distance. More on this shortly.

In the case of someone I had reason to believe was very sensitive however e.g. a trauma survivor, we might not even start with a full level one here, but stop if raising an arm with a tissue has caused a stress reaction. Paul Linden in his work with abuse survivors has sometimes had to throw the tissue in the opposite direction to the person. This might all seem quite extreme and overly cautious but I've found it's better safe than sorry and it's easier to escalate than apologise! The scale above is very safe and I have found more than cautious enough to work with general populations. Starting with shouts and grabs however is not safe, given how these may have been involved with real violence so may be triggers. They could be tackled by a trauma survivor but this would take some working up to, and best in a 1-1 setting with a trained trauma therapist. If facilitating centring, as you don't know if someone you're working with has been traumatised, and with rates of sexual abuse alone as high as they are, it's best to start with tissues or some other safe and gentle initial stressor.

### ***Example of the centring principle in use***

*Albert (name changed) is a client who has been referred by his company's HR department. He attends a day-long stress management workshop with Integration Training (my business training company) and along with all the other senior managers at the fast-paced technology company he works for. He tries a brief exercise in tissue throwing as part of the day. He has quite a strong hyper-arousal reaction which doesn't surprise his colleagues as he's known as a stressed guy with some aggression issues. Sceptical at first, he sees that just relaxing his belly and mouth makes a big difference to first his physical reaction, and then how he is thinking about a conflict with the purchasing department (he uses the phrase "no budget" as a second trigger after the tissues). He does a follow-up lunchtime 1-1 concerned about his CEO's views on his anger, his current level of stress-related drinking and deteriorating relationship with his wife. We move onto some more challenging stimuli (an arm grab and a phrase his wife says that annoys him) and embed very brief centring techniques further and giving him daily practices; each time his phone*

*rings and reminders set up on this Blackberry. People start noticing a difference at work and home, which encourages him to continue and while he remains a speedy "no nonsense" guy, he feels better, starts drinking less and has fewer conflicts with purchasing and other departments. He takes up badminton which he had played a lot in his youth and uses this as an enjoyable place to practice centring techniques.*

### **Stressors - techniques to trigger a reaction**

These are in rough ascending order of stressor strength although there are considerable individual differences in perception and response. Please read the note on calibration before trying any of them.

#### **Thinking**

Just thinking about someone you don't like, an unpleasant past or upcoming event or even imagining eating a food you don't enjoy can trigger the distress response, and be used to centre with. We introduced this as an exercise in the chapter already. I use this a lot in coaching and as an alternative to throwing tissues at people. I have also noted meditating and that I throw myself off-centre several hundred times a day doing this! With increasing awareness one catches this quicker and gets back on balance which is the important thing, not being a perfect Buddha. When I ask groups to explore the distress response this way I usually give the caveat, "someone mildly annoying, and not traumatic, maybe a 4 out of 10 on a scale".



#### **Tissue throwing**

The most gentle physical way of stimulating the distress response I know of involves throwing a tissue (US - Kleenex) at someone. This is a very safe place to start as very few people have been hurt by tissues!

- Have someone throw a tissue at you; first the body then the face if this creates no response. Observe what specifically you do in your body (e.g. twisting away, tensing the abdominals, etc.) Now do one of the centring exercises and repeat. You

can increase the speed of the throw, decrease the range (careful, this can look like a punch if close) and add a yelp to increase the strength of the stimuli when ready (see the algorithm and note on calibration). Tissue throwing even works on Skype coaching as an aside as it's triggered by a visual stimulus of a shape coming towards you! This is a good example of how our FFFF response is not logical (neo-cortical) but just responds to innate and conditioned stimuli - we *know* it can't hurt us but we may still flinch.

### **Proximity and walking at people**

Walking slowly towards someone is a stress progression (for both people) as unless we are very intimate with someone we will feel like they are encroaching on our personal space. It's important to do this slowly and either partner may use a pre-arranged signal such as raising a hand to stop the walk-in. One person walking towards another and them getting to of the way can be a nice one, the walker has to keep walking straight though. More dance is to add requests or criticism to this, or multiple walkers creating a "circle of doom"!

### **Double Wrist Shock**

This is slightly stronger, but still gentle, and is favoured by Wendy Palmer. You grab both wrists and keep pushing slightly. It has the advantage of not just stimulating first a sudden shock (as with tissues) but then also ongoing pressure. It is adapted from the martial art of aikido as are any of the grabs.

- Stand facing your partner both with the same leg forward. Have your partner grab both your wrists with the thumbs forward and elbows in. They then give you a slight jolt. Again notice your response, centre and try again. This can also be done with a pull; you may respond differently to this as it is symbolic of a different type of challenge.

### **Other Grabs**

I first saw the two-hands on one wrist grab variation used with centring from Richard Strozzi Heckler (but again, it's adapted from aikido) and involves suddenly grabbing a person's forearm with two hands using the kind of grip you'd hold a baseball bat with. It is a somewhat stronger stimuli than the first two, and I wouldn't necessarily recommend it, especially if someone has had an assault history involving grabs. One-handed is slightly gentler and doing it from behind and adding a shout adds more intensity.

NB: be careful of watches and jewellery with grabs, though tearing these off by mistake will certainly provide a stimulus to work with!



## **Face Clapping, rubbing and slapping**

Another form of partner practice is to clap your hands in front of someone's face as the stressor. This has the advantage over grabs of being without touch which is preferable in some contexts. Pretending to rub something unpleasant like slugs or cow-dung in someone's face can work well with no touch, and then perhaps with touch for a more advanced version. You can even work with actual face-slaps; rubber "marigold" washing-up gloves are good for this, though of course be very careful, especially of the eyes. This will create a strong reaction in most so I rarely use it. When it is used, I do so very very carefully. See the note on calibration.

## **Cold Showers**

If you cannot find a partner to work with, a stressor of controllable variable strength you can work with is your shower. The body will go into a contractive distress response when hit with cold water, especially if it goes on the face. This can be a strong practice so be careful especially if you have health issues such as high blood pressure and heart conditions. The nice thing about showers is that you can control how cold the water is, making it more or less challenging, a key aspect of any centring.



## **Yoga postures**

Yoga postures can be adapted to be more or less challenging. Ones where you are upright and not side-bending or twisted are most suitable as these allow the stress response of the core-line to be studied. Good examples include a more upright than a typical chair pose, leaning with your back to a wall with bent knees and feet 50cm away, sitting upright on the toes, and warrior pose with the arms down. All these can be calibrated with the depth of the pose and leave most of the body unaffected directly, so you can see the indirect influence of any FFFF response. Other challenging postures like plank or pigeon can be used but they lack this benefit.

## ***Exercise - stress yourself with a friend***

*Try some of these out and see what you notice. Remember to use consent before applying any of them, and when wanting to raise stressor levels with your partner, and don't turn it into a competition. What do you notice about your and their stress reactions. Use body-based objective language, not metaphors or describing a complete pattern. E.g. "my abdomen and jaw contracted" not "I got stressed".*

### **Non-injurious pain**

Introduced in wake-up centring, pain that doesn't harm you such as by pushing on various pressure points is a great advanced practice. I have used this with soldiers for example after working with them with more gentle stimuli didn't have much impact.

### **Fairground Rides, Martial Arts and Other Toys**

Any external stimulus that activates the distress response can be used. Fairground rides are good if you have low sensitivity though they are hard to calibrate. Martial arts are ideal if you can slow down and speed up your attacker and anything that



makes a loud noise (e.g. an air-horn) is ideal once you have established the basics. Throwing soft balls/rags, consensual tickling and bad jokes can also be used where the context allows! Threatening to pop a balloon can be used to make people tense without even doing it (thanks Marc Clarieaux for this one) and there are even toys which give out a mild electric shock every few seconds that you can play a type of stressful "hot-potato" with! Stay safe and have fun.

### **Some more challenging ones**

The "tunnel of doom" involves walking through a group of people while being pushed and insulted from all sides. Water guns are fun to illicit a response with (in the right weather). I also unite regularly and have people walk under swinging aikido weapons from soft foam bats to wooden swords to real swords, and have from time to time and with very well established consent and knowing a person well, kissed, licked, punched or bitten them.

You can be creative too of course. In Lithuania once we walked out barefoot into the snow, calibrating with the depth of snow. That was fun. Some people require lateral thinking; my friend Mairtin for example is a very "cool customer" Irish kung fu teacher, and after taking my trousers off and running at him with a knife to no effect, I found a withering look his mother used to use quiet effective. This type of thing should be re-graded as advanced techniques however, and are *highly* context and relationship dependent! Use with great care.

### **Centring for children**

Children can benefit from centring and we have helped children overcome exam stress, stand up to bullies, feel happier and provide a good example when parents are rowing. I use many of the techniques above like tissue throwing, as children have similar physiology to adults in many ways, as well as games such as those detailed below. Tickling is another good trigger for children, many of whom find being non-consensually tickled unpleasant and are keen to find a way to become "tickle-proof" through centring. In very young children you can pretend to be a scary monster or use a stuffed toy animal that roars (your voice) or similar as a centring trigger. Many people are in the habit of doing things to kids by force or threat but I only work with children who want to learn centring (there is normally a way of helping them see it's "cool" just like with adults) and safety issues of consent and calibration equally apply, if not more so.

### **A note on vulnerable populations and diversity**

While boundary violation from being stared at unpleasantly, to being groped, to being raped, happen for men and women, the statistics show it happens much more to women in most cultures than men. Sadly, for many women low level sexual harassment is a near daily event, and body image issues, while again present for men and women, are conditioned more deeply into more women at the current time. It's important for men to be sensitive to such issues and realise using certain stressors, language and jokes, during centring training, may impact women quite differently than men. Equally other populations such as certain ethnic groups may need different considerations; using centring *principles* rather than being stuck with a technique that you can adapt. For example, when I work with orthodox Jewish

or some Muslim populations we cannot use centring techniques that involve touch, but that's not a problem as there are plenty of stressors I can work with that are not tactile. We would suggest that teaching centring is generally very safe if the principles outlines are followed. However, with very vulnerable groups e.g. the veteran soldiers I recently worked with in the Ukraine, many of whom had been captured and seen many friends die, or the domestic violence groups a student works with, specialist trauma training is needed beyond the scope of this chapter.

### **Flavours of Stressor**



The type of stressor you use to develop centring exercises is important. I have been focusing on direct aggressive stimuli which accurately represent some of life's challenges in the simulators we are creating. There are however other kinds of stimuli. We have looked at pushes and pulls; the former may represent demands from a boss for example, the latter may result in multiple friends making requests when you are busy. Both can stimulate the distress

response but in different ways as they trigger different unconscious associations. We have found that reactions to stimuli correlate very highly with reactions to the real-world behaviour they model. In groups I'll ask, "and do you do this in life when pushed?" for example, and are nearly always greeted first with smiles and raised eyebrows from people who know the receiver before a "yes, definitely, I..." We have also seen grabs from behind, things you don't see coming in life. It is also possible to grab in a sleazy, begging, dismissive or wormy way; these are worse for many people than forceful "pushy" grabs. I invite you to experiment and get to know yourself better. Almost anything can be a stressor if set-up creatively.

So far we have focused on physical stimuli - these are often the easiest to calibrate and learn the basics with. We would also recommend moving onto verbal-symbolic stimuli as soon as you have got the hang of the basics, as these are more realistic and lead to more transfer to life.

### **Verbal-symbolic stimuli**

#### **Word Association**

Ask someone to say a word to you with a “loaded” historical association. This could be anything from “washing up”, to “John Smith” to “cancer”. As ever calibrate; don’t start with anything traumatic, centre and retry using the centring algorithm at the end of the chapter. You may need to ask your helper to alter the tone and volume of their voice and body language for best effect.

### **Using imagination**

You can combine actions and imagery to make some fun and effective centring exercises; for example asking people to imagine a nice juicy steaming cow-pat full of maggots in your hand and then rubbing it in their face as mentioned previously. We have an innate response of disgust to decay that can be worked with. You could also ask someone to imagine a nasty smell, an unpleasant sight or an accent they don’t like (e.g. class based or regional).

### **Using technology**

Watching challenging video clips online (politicians you don't like for example) can be an accessible visual tool that can be calibrated. If something is too much, or not challenging enough, it's easy to stop a video and find another. Faces from people's social media accounts can also be used, again calibrated for how triggering someone is. A risk in both of these methods is getting distracted of course!

Another high tech tool I have used with humanitarian aid workers is an electroshock ball in a "hot potato" game. These give a small shock after a randomised amount of time so create anxiety when passed around. These aren't so good for calibration however and may scare people too much!

### **Insults, criticism and shouting**

Ask someone to insult you and see if you can stay centred/ re-centre easily. Their tone and expression is important. Start with something neutral; the Paul Linden’s classic “You have too many noises!” is a good starting place, then move onto more targeted negative phrases you tell yourself (e.g. “you’re useless, you can’t do it”) or insults other people have told you. This can be extremely triggering so start gently and work up as ever. Calibrate with words, distance and tone, centre and retry. Ask your partner not to “freestyle” on a theme, but to stay specific so you keep control. In corporate settings we often work with client or managerial feedback. Raising voices can also be used, though as ever consent and calibration are key. Voice can also be used in other ways such a “whiney” or “sleazy” tones.

### **Compliments**

Interestingly for many people compliments are triggering and can be used in the same way as criticism.

## **Simulators**

We are symbolic creatures and react to symbolic simulations as if they are real; our unconscious cannot tell the difference and more primitive parts of the brain will still react. Like all stressors, simulators provide both insights (often particularly juicy) and a safe training ground. There are endless variations possible once you get the principle and we often ask clients, "Tell me in two sentences something that stresses you out in life" and then create a simulation based on this. Here are some examples:

"My boss checks-up on me all the time!" - We stand behind them and look over their shoulder.

"I hate it when my teenage son ignores me!" - I ask them to say his name to me, I then turn and look the other way.

"I'm sacred of commitment and being tied down" - I put a bit of rope around them (very lightly) or hold them by the wrists.

"I'm overwhelmed by requests" - I have 5 people stand around them and ask them to do things relevant to their work, or walk towards them at once.

Because people usually think in physical metaphors they will often literally give you the simulator. For example, "I feel pulled in two directions" - we could pull that person (gently) from two sides!

Almost any social interaction can stimulate the distress response if we are sensitive enough to our body-minds to notice it, and any trigger can be simulated with a little imagination. Here's the underlying principle for generating your own centring simulators:

## **Simulator Principle**

### ***Identify - metaphor - observe - insight - apply - review***

- Identify an area to be examined - listening to peoples exact words helps.
- Create embodied metaphor for circumstances - e.g. being pulled in two directions.
- Observe embodied reactions and possibilities.
- Gain insight into external circumstance (e.g. current patterns or new possibilities).
- Apply insight back to external situation.
- Review and adjust.

A useful one for bringing insight into a coaching challenge. The body has a way of feeling the symbolism of situations and reacting in a constant way to regular life, revealing both habitual patterns and creating a place to study new possibilities. If we view tango or simple leader-follower exercises as studies of relationship, or aikido as a model for conflict we are working within this frame, to give more examples.

### **Centring games for kids of all ages**

Any game or activity that involves a little pressure can be used to practice centring. Competitive games are good such as thumb wars, trying to pull each other over a line or cause each other into moving a foot by touching palms (Paul Linden calls this one samurai patty cake and there's another good one called Polish wrestling). There is also a fun four person centring game where two people face off with poker faces, and two other people are their partners trying to make the opposition smile using any non tactile means; shouting, pulling faces, stripping, whatever. The first one to smile loses.

You can use any game or activity that causes a little tension and provides feedback when you get stressed; tennis, Jenga, walking on a balance beam, playing a challenging computer game, whatever, but with the express intention of practicing centring, not just winning or doing the activity. If the game is really engaging, reminders are often needed as this intention can get lost! Games where you are more likely to win when you centre such as balance games, condition you to centre more which is a bonus. See my videos or [Paul Linden's books](#) for demonstrations and detailed descriptions of these games and more.

### **Techniques for triggering the eustress reaction**

It has been a challenge to develop well calibrated techniques for working with grasping but I have begun to make some headway. Some of the same techniques as above can be used as visualisations, but we ask people to think of something they really want, but don't have serious addiction issues around. I also use a set of pictures of thirty things that people often crave that includes everything from chocolate, to babies, to naked bodies, to money, to a wifi signal! We ask people to make a scale of these themselves and turn to and away from them to work with the grasping responses to see the reaction, to keep seeing them and then the loss of not seeing them as they turn around. A simple technique is to ask people to turn to something in the room they like then to turn back again.



In Embodied Yoga Principles I ask people to work with postures they enjoy, asking them to do then stop doing them repeatedly. A simple version of this a colleague came up with; it is to have people lie on their backs then raise their heads an inch or two. When people go back to having their heads lowered they will quickly get attached to the ease of this, and gripe after getting it back when you move between the two. Where groups are agreeable to the idea this on/off method can also be done with massage, which people often quickly get attached to and groan quite obviously when it stops!

I have also worked with actual food and beverages when a break in training is approaching, but this is harder to calibrate. Passing around a wad of actual cash is also a really interesting one to play with! In workshops I also find people get attached to partners and talking in debriefing, so use ending this as another practice of non-attachment. What matters here with pleasurable stimuli, as with noxious stimuli, are the principles of calibration, awareness and choice; noticing a habitual reaction then using centring to make another choice.

### **A note on SUDS - numbering success**

One notion from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy I sometimes use is getting people to put a number on their stress before and after a technique. Let's say we use a grab to elicit a response we may ask, "On a scale of one to ten with one being not at all stressful and ten being the most stressful, how stressful was that?" These are known as SUDS: subjective units of distress. Firstly, these help to flag if something is overwhelming (I'd have concerns of anything over a "7" in most cultures that tend to downplay stress). Next, while the numbers themselves are somewhat arbitrary, a difference in "score" after someone has applied a centring technique, when quantified like this can be very encouraging for people.

### **Concepts to centre safely and effectively**

While there are many types of centring there are just a few core considerations for it to be done safely and effectively, especially when teaching others, or leading clients through centring. I have already introduced some of them but it's worth laying them out clearly:

#### **Calibration (Goldilocks principle)**

If stimuli used for centring are too strong people will go into overwhelm and have a trauma response, and if they are too weak people will not notice them so cannot use them to grow their ability to centre. So you need to calibrate the level of the stimulus used. This is the Goldilocks principle (not too hot or too cold), comparable with the concept of "dosing" in medicine. It is critical to safe effective centring that

you approach the upper limit of your/a client's window of tolerance by starting gently, working up gradually and stopping and backing-up when a stimuli starts to seem overwhelming. Moderation is good in centring practice; actually you should ideally work with the lowest reaction a person can notice both for safety and to develop finely tuned skills safely. We all have very different limits and responses to different stimuli so when working with clients avoid assumptions or comparisons, people do not always react how you might imagine! Note too that what complicates this is that some people can't always feel their own response which may look extreme from the outside. Others have a very small window between not feeling and overwhelmed due to embedded hypo and hyper-patterns. There are others that have what Freud called "repetition compulsion" where they will unconsciously re-traumatise themselves seeking healing, and most of us tend to overdo it as Western culture has a "no pain no gain" implicit philosophy of the body. All of this suggests you err on the side of caution. If you have a trauma background you may wish to work with a trauma professional before diving into this work. If you know a client does, you may wish to refer if say you are a coach untrained in trauma work. This being said if you use calibration and consent (below) rigorously you are unlikely to bump into trouble. If you do and you or a client has an adverse reaction back off and apply one of the emergency stabilisation techniques listed.

### **Centring Principle (an expression of calibration)**

Here's the basic centring "algorithm" again as Paul Linden calls it, but more fully than previously. It illustrates calibration:

#### ***Challenge - notice - learn - repeat - centre - increase - repeat***

- Introduce a manageable challenging stimulus (with permission for others). Start with a very gentle stimulus and calibrate upwards making it more intense and realistic until a noticeable but not overwhelming distress or eustress reaction is reached.
- Notice the distress response and increase awareness of detail. Make/ask for specific body based descriptions rather than evaluations. Repeat stimuli if not able to identify a reaction.
- Learn/teach an appropriate centring technique using culturally sensitive language and add metaphors, role-models and images if helpful.
- Repeat stimulus and employ the centring technique, targeting specifics of the individual distress response.
- Notice objective reduction in distress response, subjective feelings of distress and effect on the relationship (e.g. less hostile). NB: a coach should let a client dis-

cover this for themselves not tell them. If there is no reduction of reaction after the centring technique until you find a more effective one.

- When reactivity is eliminated increase the stimulus strength (with permission again if coaching another).
- Repeat centring and continue.

This is what we do when we practice centring. Like all the other principles there are many ways of applying it, for example using many stimuli such as tissues, grabs and insults as noted; and many centring techniques. It contains sub-principles such as capable consent, calibration and individual adaptation. A well-designed yoga or martial arts class can be an expression of it.

### **Empowerment and consent**

The person doing a centring technique must be fully in charge for it to be empowering. The recover of the stressor is the boss of the exercise. They must give full consent every step of the way (e.g. if you want to increase the level of stressor). If working with a partner they calibrate the intensity of stimuli and have a no-questions-asked immediate "safety clause" if they want to stop at any time. I often ask clients, "Who's in charge?" and make sure they know it's themselves when doing a centring exercise with them, and I get them to practice saying "stop" or holding a hand up. The whole point of centring is to empower yourself or someone you are supporting to centre yourself/themselves, so this authority issue is critical. Centring is teaching people to fish not giving them fish. On EFC we really drill this into students as it's so critical for safety and is one of our few "hardline" pass/fail exam criteria.

Consent can only be given if a person is capable (for example not in a freeze response) which gives us the three C's of calibration, consent and capability. The power dynamics must also be considered; for example a student may wish to please a teacher or feels they can't say no, so we like to give explicit normalised chances to say no, "It's really ok if you don't want to, lots of people do and I can get another volunteer no problem". We also observe that the "body is saying yes" too before accepting a verbal yes (erring on the side of safety) meaning that it is not going into a visible FFFF response when asked! With more yin/water types, and high-power differential cultures (e.g. Russia or most Arab countries) we are particularly careful as their whole embodied system is set-up to say yes irrespective of their real choice.

### **Individual Adaptation and Cultural Models**

Centring is a highly individual matter and a "one size fits all" approach will not suffice. The auditory, visual and kinaesthetic aspects have already been discussed as there are differences in response to different stimuli. While the general eustress and distress responses are biological and therefore undoing these through centring universal too, there are also cultural factors at work; some cultures have lower baseline stress than others for example, some more hypo and some more hyper-aroused, and different aspects of FFFF are more expressed as acceptable. Personal and culturally significant inspirations can also be used, for example role-models which act as archetypes to aid with the process, e.g. I might imagine the steadiness of Churchill or the upright dignity of my deceased aikido instructor William Smith Shihan.



Language and imagery too needs to be matched. "Let your belly fall out" may be an accurate instruction, but for many people conditioned by Western media (particularly women) this classic from Paul Linden may not work so well! If I ask someone to relax their belly "like a kitten" or "like a predatory animal" will depend a lot on their personality to give a related example. People's belief-systems need to be taken into account and asking an atheist and a Christian to imagine they are "shining light in all directions like an angel" will have different results! (Glow worms and lightbulbs also work). As ever, use what works for you and your clients by experimenting and paying attention to results.

## **Sensing vs Sense-Evaluating**

People who are not yet trained in embodied work often do not distinguish between reporting concrete and specific sensations (e.g. "my hands feel warm" "my stomach muscles are contracted") from mental evaluations and descriptions of emotional gestalt reactions based upon these, which often quickly follow (e.g. "I totally freaked out", "I'm furious" or "I lost it"). This latter type of language is unhelpful for centring as it's the specifics of the FFFF response that need identifying in the body so that they can be changed. When observing a distress or eustress pattern, be specific, and help others to if coaching. Ask "where in your body is it?" or "how do you do that?" "how are you freaking out specifically?" to get to the details under more global evaluations. If a sensation feels "everywhere" ask "is it in my/your left earlobe or right big toe?" (it usually wont be) and then go from there. You don't need to make someone wrong or argue with them, just help them get more granular. Like much of this chapter master centring teacher Paul Linden helped clarify this one.

## **Language use**

I stress the importance of working with language alongside the body in other ways beyond the scope of this book, but when centring it is often helpful to reframe language around a distressing stimuli, removing what is Neuro-Linguistic Programming and CBT call thought distortions or thinking errors. Someone may for example say, "everyone at work hates me" or "she rejected me". Ask is this 100% accurate before doing centring work around a vague stimuli. I might realise for example, "OK, five people in my department made comments I didn't like about my work this week" or "she ended the relationship". This may sound like splitting hairs but it is important for useful centring.

I also encourage the language of responsibility helping people move from "I got stressed", to the more accurate but clunky sounding, "I did stress in my body this way...", and as a facilitator from "what happened when I threw the tissue?" to, "what did you do when I threw the tissue". This active language moves people from a victim mindset and helps them see how they are creating their stress reactions and can therefore choose something different as a response. This is not the same as blaming people for autonomic responses of course! Invitational and inquiry language rather than commands is also empowering, e.g. "I encourage you to ...", "how would it be to try....", "you could do X or Y or something else", "what would happen if...", etc. If you've been trained in more authoritarian arts such as martial arts or much yoga this can be a challenge at first!

Use of operational language is vital for leading effective centring; what this means is describing a clear method and not just giving people a desired result or metaphor. For example, "focus your attention on the sensation of breathing" not "empty your mind" or "extend energy".

### **Somatic Markers**

Learning to identify certain bodily signals that you are moving into a distress response is useful as it acts as an early warning system so you don't have to kick the cat, scream at your partner and get fired for insulting the boss before you realise you're off-centre. With training people can recognise before those around you do, a reversal of the typical situation! Look out for specific identifiable "markers" when practising centring. You may need to slow down and use gentle stimuli to do this, or go in and out of an uncentred state repeatedly (see contrast principle in later chapters). Common examples of "early warning signs" include the vision narrowing, the jaw clenching, breathing pausing or the stomach muscles contracting (all centre-line issues) but there are many possibilities. The eyes and breathing tend to be particularly sensitive so are often good places to look for as signals that a pattern is developing.

### **Juicing, Ritual and Anchoring**

If you do a centring exercise repeatedly, and I highly recommend this, it will start to build a 'juice' of its own, like saving a reserve of centring power in your body-bank. You will also develop a positive conditioned association to the process you use. What I mean by this is that let's say you always sit upright and look out of the window as you start to centre, after some repetitions you will have conditioned yourself to associate this with a centred state and it will get easier. It will also mean you can cheat in the future as just doing the first part will trigger the rest of the response as you move into unconscious competence. The good news here is that you can deliberately add a little ritual or subtle "anchor" like touching your tummy or putting thumb and index finger together to create an associative trigger, which you can use anytime, anyplace, and anywhere. Eventually even the thought of centring in this way will be enough to start the process. The bad news of conditioning is that you will associate where you do the centring with the state and it will be harder to do elsewhere; the first time I forgot my aikido clothes in class or did aikido outside for a change there was a big drop in my ability to centre for example. What I learnt from this is that it is necessary to centre in different environments at different times to get full situational transfer and truly embed the skill at a general level.

One anchoring technique I like is the “ruler-hoop” exercise where you imagine a circle of coloured light just in front of you, get into a resourceful state using memory and/or centring and then step into the hoop. Do this repeatedly to build some juice and then when you need these states, say for a job interview, presentation or difficult conversation with a partner. Simply imagine throwing the hoop down and stepping into it. I first heard of this technique from our colleague Dr Adrian Harris.

### **Distress Payoffs and Uncentred Identities**

After teaching centring for some time I asked myself, “this is pretty simple, so why aren’t people centred all over the world”? One answer is that while it is simple to learn basic centring (you can teach people in 20 minutes easily) it is not common knowledge or necessarily easy as it involves challenge. There is also the weight of millions of years of evolution and a culture structured to make us uncentered consumers, so it takes some work!

Another answer though, is that there is usually some psychological pay-off to being uncentred. In a funny way the uncentred busy, rushing way of living that is now endemic is addictive. Adrenaline is a drug. In it our egos can feel important, there is a literal chemical hit, we also don’t have to feel tricky emotions or confront ourselves in numb hypo-arousal states. For some individuals there may be other more sophisticated pay-offs, being a victim has its benefits, you are not responsible. There may also be identity level issues (E.g. “I’m a city trader not a monk! I *should* be stressed!” “I’m a passionate person!”). These may need to be addressed for any centring effort to really stick. It is always worth asking “what is my narrative around centring and who I am?” as you may need to shift this to get the most from centring.

### ***Reflection Exercise - identity and centring***

*Are you more or less “you” when centred? If you were really centred all the time who would you be? Are there any benefits for you of either hyper-arousal or hypo-arousal?*

### **Manuring**

One cunning piece of classical conditioning that will occur with an intelligently designed centring practice is tying the distressing stimuli itself to the new centred response. The trigger itself becomes the reminder to centre and the two become link. So for example, I have a critical colleague that uses a particular phrase, this



will eventually become a trigger for centring. By doing this, where you were once triggered to freak out, you are now triggered to become centred! In the words Zen master Junpo Roshi “your angst becomes liberation!” I call this wonderful phenomena “manuring” as it turns life’s shit into something useful.



### **Practice!**

All these forms take practice, the more you do them the better you get. Like a sports person practicing *before* the Olympic, it’s best to practice centring when you *don’t* need it most! E.g. develop a daily centring routine as you turn on your computer or when you make the tea, or at yoga, so you have techniques easily available when you really need them during heated meetings. A dozen repetitions a day of ten seconds to one minute is a good place to start. Who can't spare ten minutes for something that will actually save time? Linking centring to a daily activity like making tea, checking mail or going to the toilet is one way to “get it in your bones”, and low tech reminder systems can also be used. A “dedicated” practice like yoga or martial arts is even better as you can work systematically with degrees of pressure as discussed. See the chapter or videos on practice for more on types of practice.

Under pressure we revert to what we have practiced, so we need to practice when it’s easy, so centring is available when life’s hard (application). After some years of practice, I did the soft tongue and belly centring exercise in a car crash upside-down at high speed (before centring I clenched my hands so hard I indented the steering wheel pattern on my hands for some weeks) but with just a little practice you can learn to “get yourself together” in a difficult meeting, crowded train station or challenging marital row.

And did I mention you need to practice! As ever with embodiment this is key, learning *about* centring is not enough.

### ***Exercise - get on with it***

*Enough reading this book already! Go practice! Set up reminders on your calendar*

*/phone. Involve a friend. Etc.*

### **Emergency stabilisation techniques and trauma**

While embodied practices generally and centring in particular are very safe when done within the guidelines, given it may happen that you or a client feels suddenly overwhelmed. In such instances centring is usually enough to remain in a sense of balance, focusing especially on aligning structure and relaxed deep breathing. There are also techniques that are not suitable as standard centring techniques, but will disrupt a traumatic state of collapse. Wall-pushing and star jumps (US - "jumping jacks") are two simple techniques that will immediately give a sense of empowerment, as will stamping and other strong movements and corresponding sounds. Embodiment teacher Francis Briers has taught EFC students a small haka-like set of moves that involves stamps, slapping and the sound "Huhh!" that works very well, before we let them work with others at all. Paul Linden favours a technique of imagining one is sealing a well buttered bowling ball which pushes the belly out and interrupts traumatic responses. As silly as it sounds, it works great.

There are also classic trauma therapy techniques for aiding those who are starting to dissociate (space-out) by anchoring them with visual, auditory and Kinaesthetic sensation in the present moment: "can you feel my hand? How many coffee cups are on that table? Whose voices can you hear now?" While this book isn't trying to train you to be a trauma therapist, it is worth being *trauma aware*, and knowing one or two of these emergency techniques if you are going to start working with the body with others particularly.

### **Group Centring?**

So far we have only detailed individual centring techniques, however we can also "centre" in groups. All around the world when people need to get it together for child-rearing or war for example, they engage in paired or group coordination practices. These include courtship dances, war dances (e.g a Maori haka - an awesome example of an empowering anti-hypo-arousal coordination practice) and modern military drill. Following on from the idea of social centring, the notion that we regulate through relationship, coordinating activities not only bond and synchronise groups, but are powerful state management techniques for those involved. There is a joy to being one of 50,000 people chanting or clapping in unison, whether it be at a rock concert, football match or more sinisterly a Nazi rally. In other words, there is significant cross-over between coordination practices which we will cover in more detail in later chapters, and self-regulation, so one can not separate these things out. Simple facilitation exercises such as guiding a group to breath or move in unison are all "group centring" techniques. On each new year of EFC we encourage the group of participants who have come from far and wide, to take a few breaths together a few times a day to "get in sync".



Groups coordinating movement actually happens unconsciously like friends getting “in-step” walking together, or as we have found asking groups to walk around a room. Within a very short space of time they will all be walking in the same anti-clockwise direction, also in step, and more relaxed. Aligning nervous systems not only brings people closer together but calms and enlivens them, as we are social animals and it is in relationships that we find

safety, belonging and meaning.

Groups can also “centre” around shared commitments, a group mission or shared vision, as per aspect two centring. In the corporate world, where we often work the hollow shell of this possibility is sometimes framed and ignored on walls as disembodied “mission statements”, but this is not a lived embodied experience. Happily, we have also helped groups who work in a more embodied way to centre as a team physically and around “what we do”. This is a very beautiful and powerful thing to be a part of and involves aspect 2 meaning centring in groups with some simple coordinated breath, rival and movement.

### **Testing centring and the scientific paradigm shift**

Note that we have described an empirical method for working with centring where someone sees the “before” and “after” impact of a technique. This is both empowering as it means you are not being asked to believe anything, and helps “prove” centring, particularly important for more sceptical groups like we find in business quite often for example. Essentially it is compatible with a modern world-view. We find asking people to believe what we say as subject matter experts is one thing, but helping them see the impact for themselves creates a different level of trust and buy-in. Further tests to centring techniques can be done too; for example show that it’s not just habituation at work (remove centring, reapply stimulus), or that it’s not just concentration (remove centring, give another task, e.g. wiggling fingers, then reapply stimulus). There are many more examples, but more generally what we want to encourage is moving beyond blind faith and convincing people to really honest investigation. This is a shift of paradigm for much of the embodiment world as while people have always liked “what works”, a guru system and near-religious-based authority structure is present in many embodied traditions (e.g. martial arts and yoga) where what is true is established not through tests but

through tradition. Another factor is and post-modern mistrust of science which has lost much authority after the scientific horrors of the 20th century, and is present in many “alternative” sub-cultures who are usually the guardians of embodied wisdom in the West. This has been changing as world-views collide and occasionally integrate (e.g. John Kabat-Zinn and the mindfulness revolution) but there’s some way to go for a full paradigm shift.

Centring techniques can be “tested” both internally by feeling the difference. The subjective is important when we are working with shifting it! and also applying some physical test like pushing on a person to see if they are more stable. See our and Paul Linden’s quite remarkable videos on this, and “ki-testing” in aikido, though we disagree with some of the explanations given for the latter. It is also possible to test centring techniques in more technological ways using physiological monitors of such things as heart-rate, heart-rate variability (see HeartMath), hormone levels (see Amy Cuddy’s work) and brain waves (e.g. Muse or NeuroSky). Many devices for such “quantified self” measurements have recently become available relatively cheaply and conveniently (I have an £80 FitBit heart-rate monitor watch for example - Mark) so we expect to see a lot of development in centring as a result of these in the near future, as objective testing of techniques becomes possible for non-university-backed researchers and professionals like ourselves.

### **Centring evidence-base**

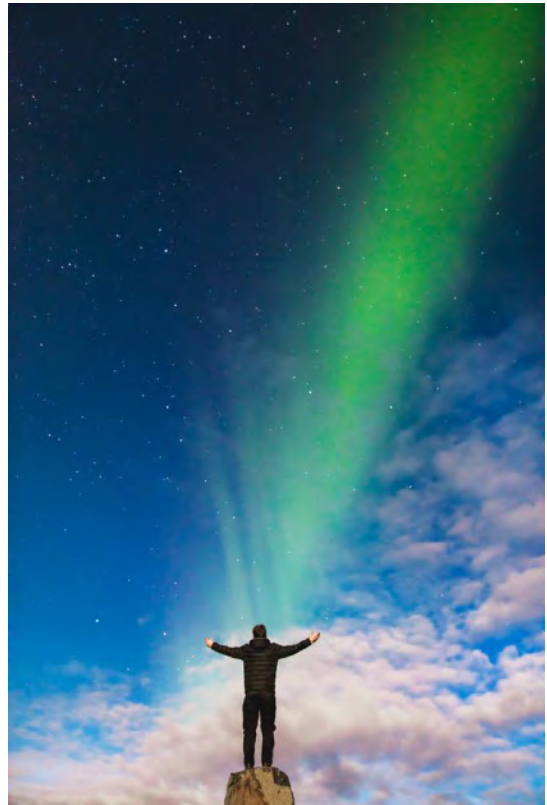
It is surprisingly hard to find good research on the efficacy of different techniques, and what is out there refers only to hyper-arousal distress reducing relaxation techniques, as much of what we have discussed here in regards to hypo-arousal, eu-stress, meaning based and social centring is innovative and unheard of by most centrists as yet. My scientifically minded colleague Mairtin however has taken time to gather what’s out there. See the appendix on this.

## **The centred facilitator**

This book is designed for facilitators of various kinds and those just keen to pass this stuff on. With that in mind I'd like to highlight the importance of two things:

1. The importance of having a long-term centring practice personally if you are going to teach it successfully and with integrity.
2. The safety precautions contained in the principles we have outlined; particularly in regard to consent, capacity and calibration. Take these really seriously if you don’t want to damage people.

A facilitator, whether they be a business trainer or a yoga teacher, can benefit greatly from centring without ever mentioning it or showing any sign of it other than positive personal self-regulation. I once taught a coach in Hong Kong who said they could never do centring with clients as it would be too strange for them (I'd challenge this isn't true if presented right but that's beside this point) but that he had gotten great benefit from the practice none the less as it effected him so positively. Similarly, there is a study of mindfulness which shows how a regular meditator teaching an arbitrary subject (Egyptian history) had a more positive result on children's wellbeing than someone who didn't meditate teaching mindfulness. The point is that it is not the technique but the practitioner, and that states are



“contagious”. In my experience this is true for facilitation of all kinds; it's not the tools they use so much as the person using them and how that impacts others. Your state rubs off, and by being centred you help others self-regulate (and therefore learn more) without having to teach it directly. This takes long-term practice and becoming a high quality embodied facilitator is not about reading books, or learning a few tricks, but about taking on a way of life through long-term commitments.

### **Main applications - self**

Aside from this generally positive “rub off” and of course the integrity of “walking the talk” (again, what people really learn from), facilitators may benefit from centring themselves in specific instances like:

- Negotiating prices and contracts
- Meeting new clients for the first time
- Presenting ideas that may be challenging for clients
- Listening deeply
- Being more inspiring
- Handling "difficult" questions
- Making presentation in front of large groups or important clients
- Ethical dilemmas

- Receiving and giving feedback

There are many more.

### **Reflection question - why centre? 2.**

*Where for you as a facilitator may centring be useful, now you have read nearly quite a bit on the subject and hopefully practiced a number of exercises?*

### **How to introduce centring**

Often coaches I am teaching to work more with the body ask how to best introduce centring to a client, and some are quite nervous about this. There is no one way, however here are some general rules:

- Be confident (practicing it yourself and seeing the benefits helps!).
- Make it no big deal. If you present it as weird, it will be.
- Connect it to what they already know, e.g. sports, yoga, whatever.
- Link to how it will help them and what motivates the client, how will it help them?
- Share your own experience authentically.
- Mention relevant science/neuroscience if client is this way inclined (or hippie connections if that's their thing). More macho or sporting types may like the martial arts connection,
- Have them try it and prove it for themselves ("don't believe me").

This video introducing the body in coaching may also be helpful (brief Romans intro!). And this.

If you're from a more "alternative" background like yoga or meditation, also watch this as there's more here on language to avoid.

### **Experiment**

*Record yourself introducing centring and note how you can improve it. Practice with a "straight" friend and get feedback on any words you used that made them shudder!*

### **Main applications - courses**

I have used centring as part of the following group courses as key content:

- Anger management
- Communication skills
- Conflict management
- Leadership
- Managing difficult behaviour

- Presentation skills
- Resilience
- Risk evaluation
- Stress management
- Time management
- Team building
- others I can't remember now!

Centring helps with so many things you can almost use it as part of any course. I certainly wouldn't dream of teaching leadership or a stress management course. Often it has been assessed by very senior people (e.g. in companies like Unilver, Ikea, Axa, Shell, L'oreal, Virgin Atlantic, Oxfam, Save The Children, and more) as the most useful thing on courses I've ran. Other members of the EFC community have similar experiences with diverse organisations.

### **Main applications - coaching 1-1**

There are many times you may wish to teach a client centring or have them centre in a learning/coaching session. These include:

- at the start of a session to let go of any distractions.
- at the start of a session to focus on the aim of the coaching.
- when the coaching has "got lost" / when the client is "rambling" / "going in circles".
- when you and the coachee find yourself arguing.
- when there's an important decision to be made.
- as part of "homework".

### **Experiment**

*Try centring at the start of a group or 1-1 coaching session and see what difference it makes. Does it deepen the work? Does it save you time? Do people enjoy it? NB: remember consent and calibration!*

This video shows me teaching a coaching client centring, and here's another integrated into a session. Also, here's another combined with Embodied Yoga.

Also check out these masterclass centring videos from Paul Linden. And this.

**Check points if setting as "homework".**



If you want coaches to get centring's full benefit they need to practice, I hope by now this is obvious! Here are some things to consider with them:

- How many times a day/week will they centre?
- When? Be specific
- What's their motivation?
- Can you link it to another experience (e.g. sports, making tea, toilet breaks)?
- How will they remember?
- What challenges may they face?
- How will you hold them accountable and support them?

### **How to integrate into movement classes**

Centring can easily be incorporated into such things as dance, yoga and martial arts classes using the principles in this book. This may be at specific times like asking a tango partner to dance, before a kick, or during difficult asana; and the *whole* of a movement class can be considered a centring exercise. My guess is for movement teachers the possibilities are fairly apparent. Be creative and let me know how you go!

### **The Centred leader**

Let's take a moment to examine leadership as centring is so relevant here too, and many readers are also likely to be interested in this area. By the extended definition of leadership people are not leaders at all without some kind of centring (though of course they may not call it this), as the first system we must lead is our own. Without being able to manage oneself there is no leadership as there is no choice, we are reduced to habitual creatures. This is what the first half of this book is all about.

By a more traditional definition of leadership, a leader is as trustworthy and has as much gravitas as they are centred. This is common sense really; think of a leader you admire from any sphere, are they panicked? Frequently scared or out of control furious? Even if they are passionate (another positive leadership attribute) they will likely have a calm to them much of the time. They have it together and this allows others to trust and follow them. This charisma is not magic but a skill that can be developed.

Leaders make good decisions as they are centred, and manage themselves and their time as well as they are centred. An uncentred leader makes rash decisions, quickly burns-out, lets others dictate their time, and will be quickly, correctly and usually unconsciously assessed as not worthy of support by potential followers. This is not a subtle difference and personal leadership of any kind requires the ability to

re-centre under pressure time and time again. Centring links to leader's emotional intelligence in that unless the sympathetic fight-flight system is moderated, the social engagement and facilitation systems of the brain cannot be brought fully on-line.<sup>8</sup>

### **When you can't centre**

The most difficult thing about centring is remembering to do it. With practice it has become close to second nature to us to apply centring under any stress with little or no thought, though this takes some years of consistent training. As with all embodied techniques, it is getting them into habitual procedural motor skills that is most beneficial, and this takes practice, either through many micro-practice repetitions or through consistently applying oneself to an art like yoga or aikido where the practices are embedded. As ever do not confuse practice with application; people who wait until they need to apply a skill where it matters to practice it will not perform well. It is best to practice regularly where consequences are low and variables can be controlled.

In the beginning it's helpful to use reminder systems, and it's also important to forgive yourself when you forget! Stress is toxic to awareness and under pressure we revert to our older patterns. New information and patterns are easily forgotten when older patterns in the more primitive parts of the brain take-over. If you know something stressful is about to happen (e.g. a job interview or speech) you can plan to centre before and set up reminders accordingly. If you remember during a surprise stress then great, but you can always centre after when you calm down to aid that process and have fewer lingering ill effects.

Even with much practice everyone has a point of stress when "all bets are off", a point of no return. So centring "early" is best. What's diabolical here is that tension is itself numbing, so the more stressed we get the less likely we are to notice it. That's why a person can be shouting "I'M NOT ANGRY!!!" while clearly being angry.

I'd also note that some issues are too triggering to centre around, often because there is an element of projection or other unconscious symbolic aspect that is involved. We find that if something robs us of our normal relatively skilful ability to centre it's usually worth bringing to therapy as something is going on! Those that

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<sup>8</sup> See also Anouk Brack's paper: Applications of embodiment in organisations.

have a lot of history and "shadow" with people, often family members, these can be the most challenging people to centre around! I often joke that compared to family dinners the war zones I have been in were easy centring application! Ram Das similarly says it's best to test your enlightenment at Thanksgiving dinner.

The other time when it can be difficult to centre is generally when you are massively under resourced and your baseline stress is high. While a well-trained centring skill is stress resistant to be of any use, there are limits to this when we are run down, and it's good not to try and rely upon centring to manage your mood and throw out sleeping and eating well for example!

### **Can you be too centred? A note on "near enemies"**

I began this book by claiming that centring can improve anything you do. I stand by this and hope you have a chance to test this for yourself relating to what mat-



ters to you. One question however is when might we *not* want to centre? I have seen negative reactions from people who want those who are centred to be more "swept up in things" and it is possible to confuse a centred person with one who doesn't care. One could also confuse being centred with detachment and lack of expression, and even emotional unavailability and dissociation. This

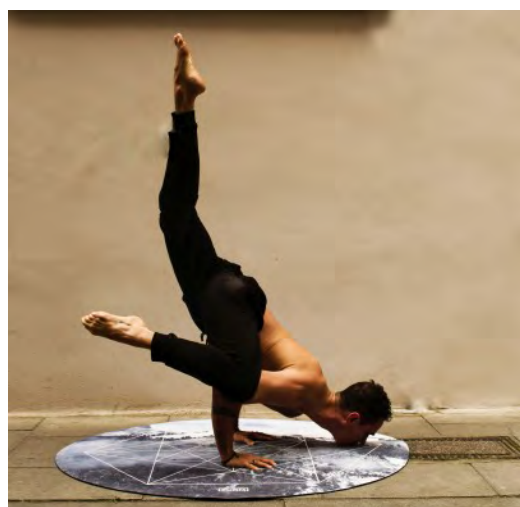
is sometimes just perceived this way from outside, but detachment is also what the Buddhists would call a "near enemy" of the engaged equanimity centring brings, so some practitioners may also make this mistake. Let me clarify that being centred does not mean not feeling or not being connected to others, but rather feeling *more and being more connected*, but managing oneself more effectively while feeling and connecting. Emotionally and intuitively speaking it is vital that one "gets the message" from your embodied reactions before managing any negative excess. Becoming a "centring robot" cut off from oneself and therefore others is the precise opposite of what we are aiming for with centring, and will ultimately be a very harmful and unsuccessful enterprise.

There is also a "power trip" trap with excess centring at the expense of emotional expression where a "nothing bothers me" attitude can develop. I have seen those who are not only cut off from their own emotions but who revel in this. As a facilitator you will likely be informed if this starts to happen though, so don't worry and most people are so uncentred this risk is far off for most! Similarly, for those working in environments that require the adaptive physical part of the distress response,

soldiers who actually fight or flight for example, there could be a fear that centring could reduce the adaptive response. This is usually caused by the common misunderstanding that tension aids these skills, it doesn't. Or/and that centring is an anaesthetic that will remove the alertness of adrenaline. Again it doesn't, it just moderates the negative effects.

### **Self-expression - the balancing skill-set to centring**

The balancing skill to self-regulation is self-expression, which involves allowing the body process to unfold naturally. This is both useful in itself as a way of accessing body wisdom, in letting go of habitual tension and for impact and influence. Someone who balances expression with regulation is inspiring as we shall come to in later chapters, as well as exploring expression in more detail. For now, let's just say that when we train students on EFC as well as working daily with centring we also dance and do deep intuitive "feel and allow" practices most days, by way of balance. In some ways centring can be seen as quote yang (even if producing a more yin state) so these yin practices are vital.



There are times when one may want to completely "lose it" and not self regulate at all in the heat of passion perhaps or when accessing oneself deeply in a safe context. To allow this consciously is quite a different experience from having no choice however, and by the wider definition of centring as "encouraging any desired state", allowing more freedom and flow by removing barriers to this is just another type of "centring". If we are honest the times that call for a complete loss of regulation are rare and more often that not, we find arguments against self-regulations merely excuses from those who are poor at it! Centring is about gathering, collecting and getting your house in order, and the benefit in exploring, playing and letting out what needs to come out. In fact, it requires a letting go of habit and getting out of ones own way, that is itself a form of self-regulation. The centring of letting go!

### **What's the opposite of stress?**

It's easy with all this focusing on stress and centring to get caught up in the negative, so as this chapter draws to a close let's ask what is the opposite of stress? As

both Western psychology and medicine is largely pathology based, or has been until recently, this question doesn't usually come up, but we think is vital to consider. What have we been aiming for with all this centring anyway? Just not being screwed-up? That's limited. "Optimal functioning or peak performance?" true, but they hardly capture our humanity and lack poetry. There are many answers as to what is the opposite of stress, including the physiological model of parasympathetic "rest and digest", but we'd like to consider another angle. The word that works best for us on a deeper answer to the question is "grace".<sup>9</sup>

Grace is an appropriate and lovely word as it can refer to both physical movements of the body and also to transcendent beauty and spirituality depth. Naturally I see the link between the two that embodiment enables. On the mechanistic level it indicates that the tools are well used; awareness, internal, acceptance, relaxation, structural alignment, balance and freedom and energy to move; all of the centring techniques presented encourage these fundamentals. Because we live in a Western medical paradigm that tends to see health as just the absence of sickness, it is not habitual to focus on the deeper aspects of grace. We can all become more centred and more graceful, and what is available at such depth is much more than just no stress or even wellbeing. What is available is our magnificent human potential which makes what is now an acceptable pass in health terms look like the paltry embryo of possibility.

## Real-world Case Studies

In this section various facilitators describe how centring has helped them apply it to various professional and personal areas. Many are part of the EFC community but they work in various different fields all over the world.

### **An example of centering success with a coachee**

- Fiona Buckland, Executive coach, London (<http://www.fionabucklandcoaching.com/>)

I find centering helps my clients when they feel overwhelmed by decisions in work, life etc. Here's an example: A client came to see me in an agitated state. He was feeling overwhelmed by the amount of work he had to do and was finding it diffi-

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<sup>9</sup> Incidentally there is also a centring technique called GRACE developed by George Leonard which is a classic, but I'm not referring to this here.

cult to prioritise. He was procrastinating, getting pulled into distractions, and staying late or working at home in the evenings and weekends because he felt so guilty. Understandably this was affecting his inner life (anxiety and stress), health (not sleeping), relationships (less quality time with partner, not able to be present), and work quality.

As soon as he sat down in a session he was off into the tangle in his head with his lists and confusions. I intruded and asked him to hit pause. I then invited him to centre together with me using six directions breath (from Paul Linden). We did it together with me talking him through it. After one round, I left him to breathe in all six directions at once as many times as he needed. After a couple of minutes, he seemed calmer. I asked him how he was. He could recognise that his mind chatter had stopped and his body was relaxed but awake. I asked him "from this place, what is the project you need to focus on first? What is most important?" Without hesitation he chooses a direction. I asked "What's the first small thing you need to do next?" and he answered again without hesitation. His inner noise had died down so he could think: he knew what needed to be done, in what order, and what could be ditched. Building on this, with further coaching, he used centering to help himself detect the difference between something being important and feeling urgent, so that he could make better and more timely decisions and reduce his stress.

### **Making the switch**

- Sharon Marshall, coach, Basel, Switzerland

For one coachee, introducing [Anthony Jack's](#) work on emotional vs rational thinking was a critical turning point in understanding that quality listening might require him to develop flexibility in 'thinking styles' and that this mattered to his success. He understood centering then as providing a space to make the switch and actively engaged in learning and practising techniques, beginning with inwardly focused centering (breath, body sensations, emotions) and later incorporating outwardly-focused, often outdoor, general awareness (how many different sounds can you hear? In what categories? What's the quietest?) and social awareness techniques (reading the mood in a person or meeting, noticing physical indicators of listening). At the end of our work a 360° questionnaire confirmed a significant shift towards active listening, empathy and greater effectiveness in both his work and home life. The client himself reported decreased levels of stress, greater satisfaction

generally and much calmer, more connected relationships within and outside of work. He has been promoted twice since.

### **Realising Burnout**

- Curtis Watkins, New York, USA

I was coaching a managing director for a global bank. He has recently lost his team and been reassigned to a position that was not very much to his liking and not really suited to his skill set. During one of the sessions I asked him to briefly close his eyes and centre himself quietly for about two minutes. He was very much a "head" person and had not spent very much time in his body at all. After two minutes I asked him what he noticed and he opened his eyes and said that he realized how utterly exhausted he was. This was a huge realization for him.

I left him with the assignment to reflect on what really mattered to him in life. The next session he declared that he was taking a leave of absence for two months to be with his family and reflect on his life, which he did. During his sabbatical he was offered a different job by a previous boss that he really liked and much more suited to his project management skills. He came back to work and was a much different player than three months earlier. He remains committed to self reflection and centring.

#### **- Another example of centering success with a coachee**

- Joanne Heeson, corporate coach, Geneva, Switzerland ([http://www.baxter-associates.co.uk/?page\\_id=500](http://www.baxter-associates.co.uk/?page_id=500))

I cannot over-emphasize the power of centring as the single most important and first tool I teach coaching clients. It is the most powerful way I have discovered to allow clients to change their state quickly once they have recognised that their way of being in a particular situation needs to change. Many clients come to coaching with areas of their professional and personal life feeling stuck. The same conversation with the same results and they feel unable to find a way to get different results. Once they realise that change can't happen through only an intellectual discussion, they realise how much they need another way of making changes, which involves asking the body to help. What clients love about centring is not only that it works and makes them feel different and less stressed about the situation instantly, but it is also quick to learn and easy to remember. They realise that it brings the ability to choose their next response. My clients have used centring in many situations including difficult conversations with colleagues, discussing donations with



funders, noticing unhelpful patterns at work, remaining calm and focused in overwhelming situations, managing difficult bosses, prioritising work load and gaining job clarity to name but a few. The potential power of centring is unlimited in my opinion.

### **With the “gym bitch”**

- Mairtin McNamara, embodiment trainer, Antwerp, Belgium

A participant in a workshop got belittled at the gym in an ageist and body shaming way, from what she called a "gym bitch". She centred at the time to not give her back abuse but to set a firm boundary, and went further with her own training. (Later used the loving kindness meditation I showed her with the triggering lady as the subject and digested the experience so she didn't keep returning to her.

### **Centering for Performance**

- Liz Peters, professional improviser and comedian ([www.lizpeters.com](http://www.lizpeters.com))

Going on stage and addressing an audience can be pretty nerve-racking. In fact, some studies claim that speaking in public is the biggest fear, greater even than death! The reason behind the fear is the inherent risk of putting oneself in the spotlight. You expose yourself to potential ridicule and derision. Historically it is safer to stay under the radar and not separate oneself from the tribe. The heads above the parapet are the first to be lopped off!

So this fear lives in the body and reveals itself in stomach churning, heat rising, heart pumping sensations. I have felt these feelings a million times, waiting at the back of a crowded room or behind the curtain for my moment to come onstage. It's such a familiar aspect of my life as a performer and, whilst the adrenaline is energising, it is important to keep it in check. If left to its own devices our protective Fight/Flight/Freeze response takes over and can significantly impact how the audience respond to us.

**FIGHT:** You come on stage with so much energy and punch that you distance yourself from the audience. You are intimidating and overbearing. The audience cannot connect with you.

**FLIGHT:** You rush through your performance speech. By panicking and going super speed, your points get lost or skimmed over. The audience cannot connect with you.

FREEZE: You come onstage and clam up. The words don't come and you are rooted to the spot like a rabbit in headlights. The audience cannot connect with you.

This is where centring comes in and I do it every time.

- First acknowledge that the feelings are normal and make a conscious decision to reframe the experience as excitement, not fear, for they are the same physiological sensations.
- Take a full breath in, feel strength rise up the spine and grow taller, elongating the neck.
- Exhale and feel softness down the front of the body, letting go of any tensions that have crept in, particularly around the jaw, tongue and shoulders, and feel your weight sink into the floor.
- Finally, expand your personal space in all directions (up down, forward back and each side) This can be done by visualising; perhaps imagining an expanding bubble around you or a colour. Or if you are backstage, physically take up more space by stretching out the arms. If you can envisage wrapping the audience up in your personal space, so much the better.

This process enables you to embody the POWER of someone worth listening to, the WARMTH of someone the audience can like and trust, and the inclusive PRESENCE of someone who is here in this room ready to connect with this audience. It can be done before and even during a performance if you start to go off track. When you are onstage a moment can feel like a lifetime, but an audience won't mind a small pause if it means you come back with poise and presence. It'll be worth it.

And remember, in spite of all your fears, this is not about you. It is about the gift you are giving to the audience. They are there because they want to hear what you have to say. Don't cheat them or yourself by letting fear get in the way. Centre yourself and allow the audience to connect with you. And you'll be a cool, calm cucumber up there!

### **The Magic Wand in Addiction Recovery**

- by Clare Myatt, therapeutic-coach, somatic addiction specialist (<http://claremyatt.co.uk/>)

Shifting from self-medication to self-acceptance takes courage and determination. Those of us who know how it is to use alcohol or other drugs, or engage in numbing behaviours (compulsive shopping, overeating, social media, gambling or the thrill of the sexual chase) know at some deep level that the road to sober satis-

faction isn't easy. In fact, it's difficult and slippery, filled with hills and valleys, boulders and other significant obstacles. If only there were a magic wand to help us get through!

I keep an actual "magic wand" in my office. It's beautiful, adorned with meaningful carvings, ribbons and embellishments. I keep it close because many clients ask if I have one; sort of joking yet really, really hoping I do, hoping for something magic to make recovery from addiction easier. And we like easy. In the past, we have used numbing as the "easier, softer way" to avoid a sense of disconnection, of feeling unloved, ashamed, bored, angry, afraid (the list goes on).

My real magic wand is centering. Centering allows us to feel empowered, in charge of ourselves; creative, spiritual, connected, loved and loveable. All of us came into the world instinctively knowing how to be centered. Then sh\*t happened and the wheels came off. Maybe not immediately but, as many of us can attest, over time. And then we started numbing with increasing frequency and things got sh\*ttier. But if we came into the world knowing how to center, we can come full circle and relearn the magic of centering. Since it's already in us, we just need to shed the layers that have shaped us and got in the way.

Similar to meditation, centering doesn't bring overnight relief, but it's worth practicing until it does. Being centered allows us to draw on our resources, resilience, and experience. Most importantly, being centered in the present moment allows us to connect with our rich internal world, our Higher Power (whoever or whatever that may be), support system, and loved ones, both two and four-legged.

### **Closing remarks**

Centring has changed my life and I hope it changes yours. If you sincerely practice what is in this e-book I'm confident it will be helpful, both for you and for your clients. Please let me know how it goes through social media or e-mail ([mark@integrationtraining.co.uk](mailto:mark@integrationtraining.co.uk)).

- Mark Walsh, November 2017, Brighton UK

### **Centring Resources**

We have many videos on **Youtube** showing centring in action with clients and detailing much of the theory here. Just search "Mark Walsh centring" there or see:

[Basic relaxation centring](#)

[Wake up centring](#)

[Demo of various partner triggers](#)

[On pleasure centring](#)  
[Centring talk and demo](#)  
[Life applications](#)  
[Centring in the gym](#)  
[Centring around money](#)  
[Centring with clients](#)  
[Centring around purpose 1](#)  
[Purpose centring 2](#)  
[On life applications of centring](#)  
[Anouk showing Wendy Palmer style centring \(also in Russia\)](#)

## **Other resources**

[In-depth centring training for facilitators](#)  
[Centring applied to yoga](#)  
[E-books and free articles by Paul Linden](#)  
[This article in Elephant Journal is accessible](#)

**Other books:** Paul Linden's e-book "Embodied Peace-Making" is excellent. By far the best book on the subject in fact. Wendy Palmer, Stuart Heller and Richard Strozzi-Heckler all have books and online resources worth a look too, and Wendy also has a centering app

Cover image by Warren Wong, and his and other images used here from the brilliant [www.unsplash.com](http://www.unsplash.com)

Thanks also to the EFC participants for allowing their images to be used.

Cover Design & Visual Design by Matt Shearing.

## **Appendices & Resources**

### **Appendix 1 - Stress Response Regulation Literature Review**

- Mairtin McNamara, PhD, embodiment teacher, EFC grad and science geek

## Introduction

This section is a literature review focused on the fight/flight response, and the efficacy of different methods for regulating the response. The references are divided into the following sections:

- The Stress response
- Regulation through consistent practice

## Summary and conclusion

The studies described here cover a range of embodiment tools, awareness/mindfulness, intention, breath, relaxation and imagination. meditation (mindfulness and loving-kindness). However, the cited work only investigates the effects of consistent practice (e.g. regular mindfulness meditation practice), or preparation before anticipated stressful situations; there are no examples of applying techniques spontaneously or without preparation.

Furthermore, there are only explicit references to down-regulation. Up-regulation was not reviewed, but presumably searching for terms related to improved performance, vigour, overcoming fatigue etc. will provide a starting point.

Meditation techniques (particularly mindfulness and transcendental) have been indicated to be especially effective in reducing chronic stress and as a consequence responses during acute stresses.

No mentions to posture adjustment or attention to the centre-line were found in the course of review, indicating that they are ideas ripe for further study and collaboration.

## The Stress response

Leblanc (2009) when looking at the impact of stress response on performance for healthcare professionals, states "Elevated stress levels can impede performance on tasks that require divided attention, working memory, retrieval of information from memory, and decision making." And concludes: "Given the potential negative impact of stress on performance, and the individualistic way in which people

respond, medical educators might want to consider avenues for training learners in stress management.”

Rahman (2009) investigated the decision making of “mission critical personnel” (paramedics, police, soldiers and firefighters) in life threatening circumstances. Relevant highlights of this article are: in stressful situations people have limited cognitive capacity that impairs the ability to judge the relevance of information, to interpret information, and physical coordination; and at the time there was a “paucity” of research and data physical responses and patterns in such scenarios. The paper itself proposes external infrastructural and communication strategies to minimise the effect an individual experiencing the stress response can have on their safety as opposed to developing introspective strategies for down-regulation.

### Regulation Through Consistent Practice

In this section articles are cited that focus on regular practices that reduce stress response in crises at least partially because of their effect on baseline resilience in general. Alternatively, these practices could be looked as a form of nurturing and self-care. Even though some of the methods described initially require at least a few minutes to complete, a number of the techniques can eventually be applied fluently during a crisis as mentioned anecdotally earlier in the chapter. Generally, these principles appear in the centring methods recommended elsewhere in this chapter.

### Massage and Acupuncture

When investigating massage therapy as an intervention in infants and children, Field (1995) found that it generally “resulted in lower anxiety and stress hormones and improved clinical course. Having grandparent volunteers and parents give the therapy enhances their own wellness and provides a cost-effective treatment for the children.”

In reviewing the literature, Harris and Richards (2010) found that “All studies using slow-stroke back massage and hand massage showed statistically significant im-

provements on physiological or psychological indicators of relaxation, promoting relaxation in older people across all settings.”

A literature review by Pilkington et al (2007) of acupuncture in regulation of anxiety indicated that it has a positive effect, however the studies themselves are not rigorous enough to be conclusive and such techniques should be used advisedly.

## Meditation

Example of a specific meditation study is from Maclean et al (1998), where the hormonal response to laboratory stressors was used as a measure of chronic stress, comparing four months of transcendental meditation to a classical stress management education and found that transcendental meditation had a stronger effect on basal cortisol levels than the control. However, the difference between pre and post-lab test showed a greater cortisol spike than in the control group. In the context of centring and crises, this is worth bearing in mind because it implies that while reducing general stress levels, it increases sensitivity to sudden stresses.

Specia et al (2000) looked at mindfulness as an intervention for symptoms of stress and mood disturbance in cancer patients. Mindfulness showed marked improvement over the control group with “fewer Cardiopulmonary and Gastrointestinal symptoms; less Emotional Irritability, Depression, and Cognitive Disorganization; and fewer Habitual Patterns of stress.” It is important to mention that the intervention consisted of a weekly meditation group lasting one and a half hours for seven weeks plus home meditation practice, which means there was also a community aspect of this intervention that may have been overlooked. Similar results are also reported by Klatt et al (2008) for healthy working adults. Robinson et al (2003) tested mindfulness for stress reduction in HIV patients and found that in reducing stress markers, it indicated for a boost in immunity although additional studies will be necessary to be conclusive.

Pace et al (2009) examined the effect of compassion meditation on innate immune, neuroendocrine and behavioral responses to psychosocial stress and evaluated the degree to which engagement in meditation practice influenced stress reactivity. These data suggest that engagement in compassion meditation may



reduce stress-induced immune and behavioral responses, although future studies are required to determine whether individuals who engage in compassion meditation techniques are more likely to exhibit reduced stress reactivity. Fredrikson et al (2008) ditto. Bluth et al (2016) self-compassion indicated to have a buffering effect from stressors.

### Somatic Control

For the purpose of the review, somatic control will be used as an umbrella term for the various muscle relaxation techniques, biofeedback, and yoga. Granted that this is a simplification and disciplines, such as yoga, arguably offer deeper benefits than clinical techniques, however at entrant levels there are not significant differences in effects.

Beary et al (1974) found that muscle relaxation (combination of a quiet room, muscle tension/relaxation cycle, and soothing imagery) reduced the sympathetic nervous system activity.

Smith et al (2007) compared yoga is comparative to established relaxation theory for stress reduction, and found that yoga has performs better, particularly for mental health. But if practice is not continued the scores tend back to the that of the control group.

A literature review on biofeedback highlight how conflicting it is and emphasises a correct choice in the choosing of where to apply it (Peper 1979).

### Music and art therapy

Bradt et al (2013) performed a meta-analysis of the effect of music on pre-operation anxiety and found that it is likely beneficial.

### Meta Studies

Liza (2011) performed a readily accessible meta-analysis of evidence based techniques for stress management, specifically progressive muscle relaxation, diaphragmatic breathing, meditation and relaxation techniques included). They

conclude that the techniques are effective for stress reduction in many different scenarios and state of health.

Rainforth et al (2007) performed a meta-analysis on reduction of stress based on blood pressure, where they compared biofeedback, relaxation-assisted biofeedback, progressive muscle relaxation, stress management training, and transcendental meditation. The outcome of the study was that transcendental meditation was the most favourable improvement had.

Murphy (1998) focused particularly on articles dealing with techniques for stress management at work and concluded that biofeedback appeared the least effective, with meditation having the strongest single effect, but combined techniques (muscle relaxation + meditation for example) were overall the most effective.

The principles described above can also be used in immediate preparation for crises: preparation with hypnosis and relaxation technique before exposure to stressful images (Paul, 1969), relaxation technique and guided image before surgery (Holden-lund, 1988); paced breathing in prior to receiving a small electrical shock (Harri, 1976).

## **Appendix 2**

This is sometimes a hot topic and different colleagues of mine feel differently about it, here's my take:

### **A controversial note on "energy"**

**- New-age delusion or key embodied tool?**

**- by Mark Walsh**

I use and define the word "energy" as "subjective potential for action". This is essentially the common-sense use of the word in non-new-age circles (e.g. "I woke up well rested with loads of energy!"). When we feel energised we are predisposed to awareness and movement (i.e. no hypo-arousal). It is a subjective matter, and not an energy like electricity we can zap people with like a Star Wars villain.

I am also happy to talk about “energy” as the pattern of sensations, how sensation is organised through body-mind. Sensation has an objective basis of course, but given what we know scientifically of anatomy and physiology this is likely to be radically different from the flowing streams of stuff it can feel like. There may well be some mechanism not fully understood of course, for example chemicals moving in fascia, but I have yet to hear a convincing case for channels of physical energy as imagined by the ancients (actually most energy theories aren’t as old as people claim but that’s an aside). There are sensations generated not by external stimuli but by the brain itself and many of the feelings labelled “energy” are an unconscious-conscious form of embodied communication. I am quite at peace with one acupuncture master’s definition of meridians as, “a map of how things connect in ways that might not be obvious to Western medicine”.

“Energy” is however sadly the most misused and misleading word in many alternative circles, largely I believe for delusional and egoic reasons. Who doesn’t want to be special and have magic powers? In alternative health, martial arts and now even in some business training groups this word is banded around with either no or more usually multiple confused meanings, and has become a kind of excuse for badly understanding something. As many of these relate to the body I’d like to make a few distinctions and clarifications, at the risk of upsetting those whose egos are invested in keeping things esoteric.

As a way of talking about subjective feeling the word “energy” is meaningful to me. I feel “energised” or “have sluggish energy today” for example as mentioned. Visualisation where one imagines some kind of electricity, fluid or light also has its uses. There is a significant effect for example of imagining healing light around an injured muscle; such body-mind links are established in scientific literature. I have used them myself many times and seen people achieve results with them worldwide. Imaging such energy has a very definite effect on the body, for example the aikido “energy arm” aka “unbendable arm”, where an arm you imagine water flowing through becomes very hard to bend arm. Intention and an *image* of energy flowing may align the body in a desirable manner, but here’s the thing, all such tricks are explainable using biomechanics, and the “energetic” image is merely a useful short-cut to what could be achieved through standard physical movement training.

Sometimes called “subtle” energy as it’s tricky to find scientifically, many phenomena describes as involving “subtle” energy are just subtle in the

sense of involving not very big movement shifts - which can lead to big results though. Attention and intention (two more internal phenomena thrown in the energy bucket) produce external micro-movements within the body and other subtle but useful changes in external physiology and internal mental states; see the chapter on these. These changes are tangible, just small and hard to spot without training, but can be explored in a systematic, logical and rigorous way. Many "energy" systems like Reiki work with this; the images produce a real physiological change (usually relaxation and warmth) which is then picked up by the recipient through body mirroring (if you relax and then touch me or I see you I relax), combined with a powerful placebo effect. Touch and the attention of a kind person do have an effect, but I do not find it necessary to postulate a non-physical force to account for this.

Placebo effects are really very large which is why evidence based medicine controls for them so rigorously, and this also attest to strong body-mind links. These are often at play in demonstrations of "energy" as are social demand characteristics. I've seen this a lot in martial arts where students fall over for respected teachers but strangers are not subject to the same magic.

Another use of the term "energy" is embodied group disposition and the changes that happen again through unconscious mirroring of other bodies. It is not magic when you walk into a funeral and suddenly feel bad; your mirror neurons are empathising in an embodied way with the other people in the room, which may at a subjective level feel like being "hit with a wave of energy". This type of event is not energy like electricity which is why it has not been measured, though someone is always telling me it will be soon. Because humans are social animals and evolution has strongly selected those who respond to even very subtle changes in a tribe's mood, these effects can be very powerful subjectively and what is causing them often below the conscious radar only surfacing as intuitive "gut" instincts and powerful feelings. Embodied unconscious to conscious communication.

There are of course tangible measurable electromagnetic energies in the more traditional sense emanating from a human body, and there is evidence that they interact in some way at close range, but let's not imagine all of the phenomena I have described which fit into this category and let's be rigorous in establishing when this type of direct electro-magnetic communication is occurring. People keen to promote "energy" in the non rigorous sense will often steal terminology like "wavelength" and "frequency", as well as some dubious misunderstandings from quantum physics and neuroscience in order to sound legitimate. You will not hear mention of "subtle

body" or "energy bodies" in this book again as they are not necessary concepts to explain the evidence and can be a grossly misleading blind-alley. As a martial artist this is not just a theoretical question to me. I want to know how to kick you in the causal head or bite your subtle nose off? I can't, so it's not energy in the sense electricity is. Incidentally, Google "energy vs MMA" or "George Dillman fraud" to see what happens when "energy" martial arts believers, believe their own advertising in martial arts. It's not pretty.

What about the energy healing arts such as shiatsu and acupuncture? I have looked into the evidence for this having once been a believer ("energy" is a strongly held orthodoxy in many traditions I have trained in) and it is very limited indeed aside from a placebo and endorphin mediated effect on pain and attention, and studies on acupuncture on horses that I was once convinced by but now seem to be flawed too.

I suggest we at least put aside such ideas of energy and subtle bodies and act agnostically to them. Perhaps they are pre-modern superstitious baggage, perhaps they are a great undiscovered country we will better undertake later, but for now I'd say it's wise to examine embodied phenomena with rigour and work with the most pragmatic models. Perhaps there are extra "bodies" and channels unknown to science, but the evidence doesn't currently support this and it is often not a helpful belief for working with the one that's evident in my experience. I was once quite reluctant to come out and say this as both as on examining the evidence I had to let go of some of my own cherished beliefs from my embodied education, and because I have experienced quite a back-lash from a community that often holds these notions with a religious fever. The time however has come to speak plainly based on reason and rigorous investigation, not blind belief.

I write this as Mark not as "we" because Francis and other members of the EFC community sees things somewhat differently and that's always been okay between us, we're a diverse bunch.

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I use and define the word "energy" as "subjective potential for action". This is essentially the common-sense use of the word in non-new-age circles (e.g. "I woke up well rested with loads of energy!"). When we feel energised we are predisposed to awareness and movement (i.e. no hypo-arousal). It is a subjective matter, and not an energy like electricity we can zap people with like a Star Wars villain.

I am also happy to talk about "energy" as the pattern of sensations, how sensation is organised through body-mind. Sensation has an objective basis of course, but given what we know scientifically of anatomy and physiology this is likely to be radically different from the flowing streams of stuff it can feel like. There may well be some mechanism not fully understood of course, for example chemicals moving in fascia, but I have yet to hear a convincing case for channels of physical energy as imagined by the ancients (actually most energy theories aren't as old as people claim but that's an aside). There are sensations generated not by external stimuli but by the brain itself and many of the feelings labelled "energy" are an unconscious-conscious form of embodied communication. I am quite at peace with one acupuncture master's definition of meridians as, "a map of how things connect in ways that might not be obvious to Western medicine".

"Energy" is however sadly the most misused and misleading word in many alternative circles, largely I believe for delusional and egoic reasons. Who doesn't want to be special and have magic powers? In alternative health, martial arts and now even in some business training groups this word is banded around with either no or more usually multiple confused meanings, and has become a kind of excuse for badly understanding something. As many of these relate to the body I'd like to make a few distinctions and clarifications, at the risk of upsetting those whose egos are invested in keeping things esoteric.

As a way of talking about subjective feeling the word "energy" is meaningful to me. I feel "energised" or "have sluggish energy today" for example as

mentioned. Visualisation where one imagines some kind of electricity, fluid or light also has its uses. There is a significant effect for example of imagining healing light around an injured muscle; such body-mind links are established in scientific literature. I have used them myself many times and seen people achieve results with them worldwide. Imaging such energy has a very definite effect on the body, for example the aikido "energy arm" aka "unbendable arm", where an arm you imagine water flowing through becomes very hard to bend arm. Intention and an *image* of energy flowing may align the body in a desirable manner, but here's the thing, all such tricks are explainable using biomechanics, and the "energetic" image is merely a useful short-cut to what could be achieved through standard physical movement training.

Sometimes called "subtle" energy as it's tricky to find scientifically, many phenomena describes as involving "subtle" energy are just subtle in the sense of involving not very big movement shifts - which can lead to big results though. Attention and intention (two more internal phenomena thrown in the energy bucket) produce external micro-movements within the body and other subtle but useful changes in external physiology and internal mental states; see the chapter on these. These changes are tangible, just small and hard to spot without training, but can be explored in a systematic, logical and rigorous way. Many "energy" systems like Reiki work with this; the images produce a real physiological change (usually relaxation and warmth) which is then picked up by the recipient through body mirroring (if you relax and then touch me or I see you I relax), combined with a powerful placebo effect. Touch and the attention of a kind person do have an effect, but I do not find it necessary to postulate a non-physical force to account for this.

Placebo effects are really very large which is why evidence based medicine controls for them so rigorously, and this also attest to strong body-mind links. These are often at play in demonstrations of "energy" as are social demand characteristics. I've seen this a lot in martial arts where students fall over for respected teachers but strangers are not subject to the same magic.

Another use of the term "energy" is embodied group disposition and the changes that happen again through unconscious mirroring of other bodies. It is not magic when you walk into a funeral and suddenly feel bad; your mirror neurons are empathising in an embodied way with the other people in the room, which may at a subjective level feel like being "hit with a wave of energy". This type of event is not energy like electricity which is why it has not been measured, though someone is always telling me it will be soon. Be-

cause humans are social animals and evolution has strongly selected those who respond to even very subtle changes in a tribe's mood, these effects can be very powerful subjectively and what is causing them often below the conscious radar only surfacing as intuitive "gut" instincts and powerful feelings. Embodied unconscious to conscious communication.

There are of course tangible measurable electromagnetic energies in the more traditional sense emanating from a human body, and there is evidence that they interact in some way at close range, but let's not imagine all of the phenomena I have described which fit into this category and let's be rigorous in establishing when this type of direct electro-magnetic communication is occurring. People keen to promote "energy" in the non rigorous sense will often steal terminology like "wavelength" and "frequency", as well as some dubious misunderstandings from quantum physics and neuroscience in order to sound legitimate. You will not hear mention of "subtle body" or "energy bodies" in this book again as they are not necessary concepts to explain the evidence and can be a grossly misleading blind-alley. As a martial artist this is not just a theoretical question to me. I want to know how to kick you in the causal head or bite your subtle nose off? I can't, so it's not energy in the sense electricity is. Incidentally, Google "energy vs MMA" or "George Dillman fraud" to see what happens when "energy" martial arts believers, believe their own advertising in martial arts. It's not pretty.

What about the energy healing arts such as shiatsu and acupuncture? I have looked into the evidence for this having once been a believer ("energy" is a strongly held orthodoxy in many traditions I have trained in) and it is very limited indeed aside from a placebo and endorphin mediated effect on pain and attention, and studies on acupuncture on horses that I was once convinced by but now seem to be flawed too.

I suggest we at least put aside such ideas of energy and subtle bodies and act agnostically to them. Perhaps they are pre-modern superstitious baggage, perhaps they are a great undiscovered country we will better undertake later, but for now I'd say it's wise to examine embodied phenomena with rigour and work with the most pragmatic models. Perhaps there are extra "bodies" and channels unknown to science, but the evidence doesn't currently support this and it is often not a helpful belief for working with the one that's evident in my experience. I was once quite reluctant to come out and say this as both as on examining the evidence I had to let go of some of my own cherished beliefs from my embodied education, and because I have experienced quite a back-lash from a community that often holds

these notions with a religious fever. The time however has come to speak plainly based on reason and rigorous investigation, not blind belief.

I write this as Mark not as "we" because Francis and other members of the EFC community sees things somewhat differently and that's always been okay between us, we're a diverse bunch.

## About Mark Walsh

- Bsc (Hons) Psychology.
- Founder and co-lead of The Embodied Facilitator Course.
- Extensive training and facilitation experience with organisations worldwide, including Unilever, L'Oreal, Shell, Ikea, Virgin Atlantic, NHS, The Institute of Development Studies, The Natural History Museum, The House of Lords, The Met Police, and The Army of Sierra Leone.
- 20+ years of aikido training and teaching on five continents. Black belt.
- Experience of embodied resilience training and peace-building in numerous areas of conflict from Afghanistan to Ukraine.
- Ten-year-plus apprenticeship with Being-In-Movement founder Paul Linden.
- Residential training in somatics (the study of the conscious body) and Embodied Leadership at Strozzi Institute, California, with Wendy Palmer, and with Uzazu founder Dylan Newcombe in The Netherlands.
- Experience of training in numerous other physical systems such as yoga, tai chi, Feldenkrais, flamenco, tango, contact improvisation, jiu-jitsu, MMA and 5Rhythms.
- Training in integral theory (Ken Wilber et al).
- Four years in the outdoor education industry training in climbing, abseiling, team building, orienteering, fencing, archery, snowboarding, trampolining and leadership.

- Extensive Non-Violent Communication training, including study with NVC founder Marshall Rosenberg, and pioneering work with “Embodied NVC”.
- Training in the linguistic coaching system of Fernando Flores.
- Coach training with several organisations including Newfield, who he’s taught embodiment for.
- Numerous mindfulness training courses, meditation retreats and monastic stays.
- Also the founder of Integration Training, Embodied Yoga Principles and Purpose Black Belt.
- Hosts #1 training [Youtube Channel](#) (with 12 million hits), The Embodiment Podcast. Is one of the most followed trainers on [Twitter](#) worldwide (35,000+ followers) and writes a popular management training [blog](#).