



# WINNING IS HEALING

**Body Awareness and  
Empowerment for  
Abuse Survivors**

**A Downloadable E-Book by  
Paul Linden, Ph.D.**

*A practical manual for trauma  
survivors and the professionals  
who work with them*

CCMS Publications  
Columbus, Ohio   
[www.being-in-movement.com](http://www.being-in-movement.com)

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by Paul Linden, PhD

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## What others are saying:

“I have seen firsthand the immense value of Paul’s work. I believe that he is presenting new material in a new way that will be of tremendous benefit to both clients and professionals. The body awareness process that Paul has developed is a unique and significant contribution to the field.... Furthermore, I know from my own experience that his book will be of value to psychotherapists working with other populations, including substance abusers and eating disordered individuals.” *Shirley Lange, Ph.D., Psychologist, Columbus, Ohio.*

“Bodyworkers are generally not taught about abuse or given bodywork tools to work with abuse issues, but massage therapists and other bodyworkers often see clients who are abuse survivors.... Paul’s method gives bodyworkers the tools to extend their work into important areas of body healing. It is a unique and especially effective approach because it is an integrated, holistic method. It doesn’t separate the body and mind, and it allows people to work through emotional issues as they manifest in the body.” *Kim Fouty, Licensed Massage Therapist, Columbus, Ohio.*

When you meet Paul you know right away that something unusual is afoot. Unusual and fascinating, you quickly discover. You become spellbound and overwhelmed when you see him work with a sexual abuse survivor both gently and powerfully showing her how her trauma is continued in the posture of her body and how by making small subtle adjustments she can both release the fear and gain back a power she may have never known she had.

Paul’s special expertise includes an uncanny way of breaking down complex posture and movements into constituent parts that he can then show you how to reassemble in a balanced powerful and relaxed way. He has developed simple exercises that help you identify and work with the fixated residuals of fear and horror that live in the “bodymind” of the traumatized. He will show you how to enter into the physical world of the traumatized and how to move past the physical blocks that impede “verbal therapy.” And, he will show you how to powerfully resolve the frozen defenses that immobilize and break through into a new sense of power, peace and competence (what Paul might call a true state of love).

I have studied with Paul Linden, trained on the Aikido mat with him, and had him work with patients I have had in therapy for years. His work is extraordinary. It is powerful and is the most refined, “biopsychophysiological” the most astute, and spiritually the most fulfilling, of any type of healing for sexual and physical trauma I have encountered anywhere. *John D. Ogram, M.D. Psychiatrist. Third degree black belt in Aikido. Herndon, Virginia*

“I can’t imagine being where I am today without the work Paul and I did together. It was damn hard, but I have never felt as whole, and as present, peaceful, and happy as I do now. The work really helped me be aware of my body, where the pain and the secrets were kept. Once I could address that, things fell into place. There really can be a life after abuse.” *Body Awareness Student. Columbus, Ohio.*

As someone who suffered childhood abuse, I found that for me, this book was the best help available. The centring and breathing exercises were extremely helpful and effective. After only one reading, the book has already made an enormous difference in my life. It has had a powerful and very positive effect on me. Unlike many other books on the subject of abuse, this one addresses abuse survivors directly, rather than always talking *about* us. This is an important difference, and I believe it was a major factor in my healing. Dr. Linden also includes self-defence in a unique application to the healing process. Without the help offered by this book, I would not have been able to progress beyond the limitations within myself and regain a sense of personal integrity and physical safety. I know that by re-reading it, and continuing to practise the exercises, I will consolidate the initial marvellous effects of my first reading of “Winning Is Healing.”  
*Reader. England.*

You've managed to make the book specifically for survivors, but general enough that if one doesn't think of oneself in those terms, the exercises and commentary are still of interest. Your style is wily and intriguing enough to make one want to read just a little farther. *Nick Finck, Reader, San Francisco, California.*

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## **E-BOOK PUBLICATION**

Publishing *Winning is Healing* as an e-book makes it accessible to people who need it. Rather than having a paper book confined to book stores in the USA, putting it on my website means it will be instantly and inexpensively available throughout the whole world. Here is an e-mail I received from a someone who lives far away from the United States:

I just want you to know that I recently read some of your articles in the internet, and tried some of the exercises. I have a history of sexual abuse from childhood to adulthood.... In the course of my therapy, I realized that my body needed some sort of [work] too.... Somehow, I couldn't release the tightness in my pelvic area.... After reading your articles, I tried the "soften belly" exercise and got tremendous relief all over my body. Last night I was bold enough to relax the anal and vaginal areas.... I am now enjoying an easing up in my abdominal and pelvic areas. Thank you for putting those articles in the internet! I live in ..... and body movement [modalities] like BIM are non-existent here.

### **DOWNLOADABLE FILE**

*Winning is Healing* is being distributed as a PDF file. That is a cross-platform file format (can be read and printed on any computer). The PDF file is six megabytes and can easily be downloaded at [www.being-in-movement.com](http://www.being-in-movement.com). Downloading the file will take about 20 minutes with a 56k modem. In order to keep the file to a manageably small size, the images were input at only 600 dots per inch, which will, however, print clearly enough for easy reading.

### **PRINTING & BINDING COPIES**

The e-book has been formatted so that you can print out a copy on standard paper and have it bound. The margins have been set so that you can print it either single or double sided, and it will still bind correctly.

### **E-BOOK ORDER & PAYMENT**

The file sells for \$8.95 US for each copy. To order the book, go online to my website and use a credit card to pay. The website is [www.being-in-movement.com](http://www.being-in-movement.com).

## **SERVICE MARK**

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## **DISCLAIMER**

This book is designed to provide information in regard to body education and abuse recovery. It is not intended to provide all the information that is available or possible. The reader is encouraged to read widely and learn as much as possible about the topic.

This book is designed to fulfill an educational objective. It is not designed to provide treatment for any condition. If any condition requires treatment, then the services of a qualified professional should be sought.

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## **WORKSHOPS & PROFESSIONAL TRAININGS**

If you would like information about professional certification in *Being In Movement*® mindbody training, or if you would like to have me do a *BIM* workshop, please contact:

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Information on BIM workshops and professional training is available at my website: [www.being-in-movement.com](http://www.being-in-movement.com)

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

---

Nancy had been physically and sexually abused by her father when she was a child. She was referred to me by her psychotherapist for lessons in body awareness and empowerment. Actually, she wasn't just referred, she was brought. Her therapist came to our first lesson because Nancy was too scared to come alone.

Often as we worked, Nancy looked compressed and hard. Her chin would go up as she pulled her head back and down. She would clench her fists and tighten her shoulders. Along with that compression, paradoxically, came a general collapse. Her body would sag, and she would space out. After we had worked together for a while, I suggested that to me the combination of hardening and collapsing looked like somebody preparing to lose well. She was hardening herself to be stubborn, take the punishment, and fight back; yet she knew it was hopeless, and her real goal was to just stay stubbornly quiet while she was raped again. Nancy said that was just what her life had been like.

Over the course of six months of lessons, I helped Nancy create in her body an integrated physical state of awareness, power and love. This is a body state of expansiveness and joy. We practiced using that state as a foundation for eliminating dissociation and body numbness and confronting honestly what had been done to her. We used that state of body presence as a foundation for practicing skills of self-defense. She learned to stay present and focused and WIN when I acted the role of her abuser. She experienced that power can be loving and life affirming, and she used that kindhearted power to reclaim her body and her life.

One day toward the end of the time we worked together, Nancy came in for a lesson with a glowing grin, and I asked her what she was grinning about. She said she'd had to go back to her parents' house to get something. When she was little, her father would often lose his temper and choke her unconscious just to shut her up. When she was at her parents' house, he lost his temper again, but this time as he came at her to choke her, rather than holding her breath and dissociating, she automatically breathed and dropped into the posture of balance, power and love that we had been practicing. She parried her father's grab, spun him around, threw him up against the wall and said clearly and loudly, "You can never do that to me again!" Then she left. That is true healing. Through her own skilled efforts, as an adult, she succeeded where as a child she had been defeated.

Nancy did not respond to the attack with tension, fear, and shock, which would have led to her losing yet again. Nor did she respond with rage and brutality, which would have created further inner pain even had she won the fight. She responded with loving power, which allowed her to win, and win in a way that



was healing to her. Power is often thought of as violent, and winning is often thought of as being synonymous with aggression. *Winning is Healing* will take you beyond the common conception that power is violence to an experience of the deep spiritual and practical importance of integrating power and love. Winning based on kindhearted power is life affirming and is the only way to escape from the cycle of pain, fear, rage, and violence.

During your abuse, you experienced your powerlessness in a very deep and penetrating way. (Perhaps you weren't abused but are reading this book as a person who works with abuse survivors. Much of this book will be addressed directly to abuse survivors, and some of the book will speak specifically to professionals who work with survivors. Whichever group you fall in, you can read all of the material and take from it what applies to you.) The work you will do in this book will start with helping you gain precise awareness of what you continue to do in your body that maintains that sense of powerlessness. The next step will be to develop a somatic (mind/body) state of power and love. You will learn to use awareness, power and love as a foundation for creating safety, freedom and joy in your life.

Winning is healing! Losing trapped you. Winning will allow you to reclaim your body and take back your life. Winning means living with power, love, and joy in your body and spirit. This book will show you how to win.

## **IN A NUTSHELL**

The body work in this book will be detailed and intricate, but it is fundamentally simple and based on nine simple ideas.

1) Trauma is relative to resources. A threatening situation will be experienced as overwhelming and therefore traumatic only if you lack the resources to cope with it easily and successfully.

2) If you can't control your environment, you'll control your awareness. The direct response to a threatening situation is to act to protect yourself. However, if you lack the resources to take control of the event and neutralize it, you will opt for anesthesia. You will utilize the indirect coping strategy of reducing your awareness of your body and your environment. Reduction of awareness, however, leads to powerlessness and an even deeper sense of being threatened.

3) What was learned in the past endures until new learning takes its place. The past is over. However, information, habits of action, and self-concepts that were learned in the past are the basis of action in the present, and until new learning supplants the old learning, the past learning will control present action.

4) Mind, emotions and body are equivalent. Thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and intentions both shape and are shaped by patterns of breathing, muscle use, posture, and movement. Studying and working with the body is a practical, concrete way of studying and working with the whole self.

5) Small steps and repeated practice are the basis for efficient learning. You will notice that in the course of the book we will return over and over again

to certain ideas and practices, each time with an elaboration and development of them. Understanding and mastery are best developed through breaking down large chunks of learning into smaller, more digestible pieces.

6) Losing is damaging. The pain and damage caused by trauma are maintained and held in place by the experience of powerlessness. Trauma survivors' self concepts and habits of daily action include and are based on the sense that they are unable to act powerfully to create effective boundaries and real safety.

7) Powerlessness is closed, and power is open. The physical process of hardening and constricting breath, posture, and movement is the essence of trauma and powerlessness. Releasing and opening the body is the opposite. Symmetrical radiance and expansiveness are the path to empowerment.

8) Power and love are fundamentally inseparable. Love without power is weak and ineffective. Power without love is ultimately self-destructive and weak. The body is designed to function most efficiently and effectively in an integrated state of power and love.

9) Winning is healing. Effective and successful self-protection action renews the self. The experience of effective and empowered action to control a threat and create safety corrects the victim self-concept created by trauma. Healing and wholeness are built on the foundation of effective capacity of the self to control the environment.

## **WHO THE BOOK IS FOR**

This book is for abuse survivors and the professionals who work with them. Of course, different people will come to this book with different backgrounds of knowledge. Since I am addressing varied audiences with varied backgrounds, some of what I say may be review for some but new for others.

If you are an abuse survivor, the book will speak directly to you about practical skills and understandings. You will experience exercises for enlivening your awareness, reclaiming your body, finding your rightful power, learning to access love, and for being able to speak your truth in safety and move on past the abuse. You can go through the exercises in the book by yourself, with other survivors in a group, with a somatic educator, with your psychotherapist, or with other appropriate professionals.

Most of this book will speak to adults who were sexually abused as children. However, what is needed in the process of recovering from non-sexual childhood physical abuse or neglect is very similar. Similar too is recovery from physical assault, rape, or domestic violence experienced by adults. There are also non-abuse traumas such as a car crash, fire, surgery, or life-threatening illness, and many elements of the somatic process will be applicable there as well. The material described here will even be applicable for recovering from traumas that you've inherited. I have, for example, worked with children of abuse survivors or Holocaust survivors, and they learned from their parents some very deep trauma responses that they had to work to recover from. So if you were not abused as a

child, or not abused sexually, or not even abused yourself, or traumatized but not through abuse, you can read through the book and take from it what does apply to your particular situation.

Even though the book is written to speak to survivors, it is also for the professionals who work with abuse survivors. If you are a professional, you will learn body awareness techniques that you can use with your clients, and the techniques that help survivors find their power will also help you bear up under the weight of the pain that your clients bring to you.

If you are a psychotherapist, you may be very familiar with abuse issues, but the body-oriented approach that is the core of this book will help you see things from a new and powerful perspective. In particular, if you come from a therapy perspective, this book will show you an educational perspective for working with abuse survivors.

Massage therapists, dance therapists, body workers, somatic educators, yoga practitioners, martial artists and other mind/body practitioners also have a part to play in helping abuse survivors gain control of different aspects of themselves and their lives. If you are in one of these professions, the tools and information in this book will broaden your understanding of how to use the work you already do and will teach you new skills as well.

If you are a professional, you may wish to get together a group of professionals with whom you can practice the exercises in the book.

## **TRAUMA**

I'd like to suggest some ideas that will form the core of the book. We will return to these ideas again and again, deepening and expanding them each time. A key idea is that a fundamental function in the human organism is the protection of self.

A traumatic event is an event that overwhelms the individual's coping and survival resources, and the result is that the protection function breaks down. When this protection function is disturbed, there is profound damage to the whole person and his/her ability to act effectively. Regaining wholeness must necessarily include rekindling this fundamental self-protection function.

Notice that what constitutes a traumatic event is dependent partly on the resources an individual has. If a person who can't swim falls into deep water, that can be traumatic. If an excellent swimmer falls into the water, that can be fun. Abuse of a child is always traumatic. But if an adult gains enough power to protect her/himself successfully, events that would be traumatic to a powerless person become tolerable and non-damaging.

The basic trauma response is physical constriction and body numbness, which are designed to anesthetize the person and suppress feelings of powerlessness, danger, and pain. By increasing the resources available, the individual becomes stronger. She or he ceases to pull inward, away from the world, and goes outward to triumph over the traumatic event. By learning to swim with mastery

and joy, the old traumatic near-drowning retroactively releases its hold on the individual. And the organismic protection function will begin operating appropriately again. Wholeness can be recovered.

## THE PROCESS

Winning is healing. Winning creates safety and freedom. In this book, we will focus on two areas of threat. The first is internal, and the second is external. Abuse survivors frequently experience internal mental or physical sensations that are painful and out of control. Such sensations may be self-generated, for example free-floating panic, or they may arise in response to outside events such as being yelled at. The first aspect of *winning* involves learning skills of physical self-observation and control so that these painful inner feelings don't rule your life.

The second aspect of *winning* involves learning to protect yourself from external threats. External threats include both past and present events. To feel free, you must experience your ability as an adult to defeat the assaults you experienced as a child in your abuse. You must also practice and master skills for keeping yourself safe in the face of present challenges and threats.

In order to *win* and heal from your abuse, you must reclaim your body. Rather than seeing abuse from a purely a psycho-spiritual perspective, you will begin to understand the crucial role the body plays in finding wholeness and healing from abuse. Your body is the tangible aspect of your spirit. You must learn to live fully in your body, experience your Body as your Self, and learn to move in power, love and joy.

Working with the body is particularly effective because the body is concrete and observable. The unique teaching methods that I have developed offer abuse survivors a precise and rapid way of overcoming helplessness, dissociation, body numbness and the costly survival strategies that are so common.

In a carefully paced process, I combine somatic exploration with instruction in self protection. I set up movement experiments which represent survivors' issues in scaled down, safe forms. I have students express moment-by-moment what is happening in their bodies as they respond to the challenges in the movement experiments. I show students how to use postural alignment, stability, mobility and power as a pathway toward focused alertness, spiritual power and love. Then I have students practice using this state of mindbody fullness as a foundation for overcoming the challenges in the movement experiments. Gradually, through increasing the difficulty of the experiments, I help survivors strengthen themselves and gain the ability and experience to directly confront and triumph over the specific traumatic events of their lives..

In talking about "healing," I am referring to the journey toward wholeness. I am talking about the process of learning skills for empowerment and self-protection. This is what you will be reading about and working with in this

book. This book is about practical tools, and you will learn more than you can imagine by using the tools to reclaim your body.

## **BODY AS THE FOCUS**

What is *body awareness* training? Why is it important? What will it help you do? Here are some brief ideas which will help you understand the focus of the book.

When you were abused, you were hurt. You are now an adult living with the results of your abuse. Perhaps you experience constant fear, or overwhelming anger, or feel distant from your body and emotionally numb. Perhaps the strain of your life has resulted in somatic (body) discomfort. Perhaps you fear human contact and live an isolated and lonely life. Perhaps you feel like a victim and can never stand up for yourself. There are so many possible results of abuse.

Every result of abuse involves some body process. What is *fear*, for example? How would you define fear? Most people define the word “fear” by talking about the mental/emotional experience of fear. I would define fear as *a series of physiological events in the body*. Fear is composed of raised heartbeat, muscle tension, constriction of breath, postural constriction and so on. The *feeling* of those physiological events is what the person undergoing the events experiences, and that is what we usually focus on when we use the word “fear.”

Becoming aware of the *body events* which bubble along within you, often out of your conscious awareness, is important in the process of self-observation and change for a number of reasons.

First, taking a body perspective transforms a feeling from an overwhelming, incomprehensible experience to a series of simple physical events. Instead of feeling terror, for example, you may be tightening your throat, stopping your breathing, hunching your shoulders and so on. This new way of understanding feelings takes some of the power and fear out of the feelings.

Second, examining your body will help you become aware of and understand what you are feeling. Very often our awareness is restricted to just one part of what we are feeling, but the whole of what we are feeling is happening in our bodies. By scanning your body, you can bring into your awareness the body events you aren't noticing, and you can start to feel them *as emotions* and understand their influence on your actions and your life.

Third, once you understand feelings as series of physical *actions*, you begin to realize they don't *just happen to you*. They are physical actions that you are doing, even if you aren't normally aware of your role in doing them. And once you realize that emotions are actions that you do, you can choose to do the opposite actions. You can replace one set of actions with another. Looking at fear, for example, instead of tensing muscles, you can relax them. Instead of reducing breathing, you can increase it. Instead of shrinking, you can open up. And when you do the opposite of fear, you will feel the opposite of fear, and you

will become the opposite of afraid. You will become relaxed, alert, capable, and courageous.

Speaking of emotions as physical actions is a very active way of speaking. Active language is the language of hope and responsibility. It focuses on your active role in what you feel and do and on your ability to create change.

Fourth, examining your body will help you understand where your feelings came from. Going back to the example of fear again, you may not even remember the source of your life-ruling fear. However, once you can study your fear while maintaining a calm mind/body, you can find the source of the fear. By becoming aware of the *body events* which comprise fear, you can dialog deeply with your body and gain an awareness of how the fear came to rule your life. In many cases, dialoging with your body will bring to mind experiences that you always knew about but have kept out of conscious awareness for years. It is important to know the source of your feelings so that you can change them.

Fifth, by creating within yourself the body state of loving power, and in that state confronting the events of your abuse, you can break the chains of the abuse, whatever that abuse may have been. By hearing the words that were spoken to you, but *this time* speaking your truth from a place of calm strength instead of being silenced, you can release the hold the abusive words have kept on you. By role playing the physical attack you experienced, but *this time*, instead of being hurt, defending yourself calmly, lovingly, powerfully and successfully, you can break the bond to the attack and the old defeat.

## LEARNING

*Learning* is the essence of the process I have developed, and learning is what life is all about whether one is an abuse survivor or not. Many people approach work with abuse from the perspective of disease, damage and dysfunction, and with *diagnosis, treatment and cure* as the operative ideas. What you will experience in this book is based on an entirely different perspective.

Learning, skill development, enhancement of understanding and ability—that is what this process is about. That is not to say that treatment modalities are not important. They are very important, and the work in this book forms a valuable complement to treatment. However, to make best use of this book, you should keep in mind that what you are doing here is studying and learning. Trying to cure an illness is a very different task than learning and achieving excellence.

The focus of this book is on achievement of a fundamental human state of mindbody wholeness and clarity of thought. I teach precisely the same exercises to people who have never been abused. What I teach is a mix of postural balancing, logic and philosophy of science, and self-defense. I teach the same thing to people who want to swing a golf club better or become better public speakers. The details vary depending on the area of application, but the core material I teach remains the same. Of course, in any specific area, to teach effec-

tively it is important to understand the background details, but the essence of this book is about the fundamental human process of becoming whole.

Feelings of helplessness and constriction are a constant in human life, and the process of gaining openness and ability is the same in every area of human activity. Whenever we feel overwhelmed by some challenge, we shut down our bodies; and learning to open our bodies helps us gain control of ourselves and our environment. That is the essence of the learning being done in this book.

## **POWERLESSNESS AND EMPOWERMENT**

*Mastery* is the core of the body process work I have developed. *Powerlessness* is the fundamental wound, and becoming whole is the journey from powerlessness to power.

Powerlessness is the heart of abuse (and of most non-abuse problems as well). Powerlessness is an element of all the effects of abuse and all the ways that people cope with abuse. Powerlessness is the experience that you cannot effectively protect your body and your self. Children are, of course, powerless compared to adults or even older children. Children lack the life experience, the training and the physical strength to protect themselves against people who wish to harm them.

When children are loved, nurtured and protected, this powerlessness is not a problem. It isn't even really noticed, except in the context of the growth of power and ability. The job of the loving adult is to help the child experience successive waves of increasing mastery and empowerment so that she or he grows up to be capable and confident.

When a child is abused, s/he notices her/his powerlessness in a deep and despairing way. This powerlessness looms so large that it becomes the central fact of self-identity. The terror, rage and pain that result from the specific acts of abuse anchor the powerlessness as a fixed feature of the internal self-landscape.

Then an important process happens. Since the child is not powerful enough to directly and effectively change the world to make it safe, he/she takes indirect action to create safety—or at least the illusory feeling of safety.

One way to create safety is to alter the *perception* of the world. Since the child cannot directly and effectively change the world to make it safe, she changes her perception of the world to make it look safe. By deflecting attention from the abuse, the resulting pain, and the abusive environment, the child lives *as if* the abuse hadn't happened. This is a process of anesthesia. If the event which causes pain cannot be stopped, then the awareness of that event and the pain it causes will be stopped. Anesthesia can take the form of body numbness or mental dissociation. Anesthesia is an active, creative, intelligent way of coping with an unbearable life. But anesthesia is no way to live, and at some point abuse survivors have to give up anesthesia to have a life.

Another indirect way to create safety lies in the attempt to make oneself uninteresting to the abuser so that he or she won't engage in further abuse. Perhaps the little girl eats and eats, hoping to become so overweight and unattractive that no one would have any desire to rape her again. Perhaps the little boy becomes withdrawn and quiet, becoming so invisible that his abuser won't see him and hurt him again.

The variety of indirect coping strategies is vast. I had a client who was quite overweight, and as we investigated the body sense of having that extra fat, she realized it she used the fat in two ways. First, she felt that the fat wasn't really her, so it functioned as a buffer layer between her and her abuser. Second, the fat was concrete evidence that she was too physically weak to have fought off her father the many times he raped her. She wanted her mother to stop blaming her for having sex with her father, and that was her way of communicating that it wasn't her fault.

There are many coping strategies, but they are all indirect ways to protect the self. They are all based on the sure knowledge that the abuse victim is not powerful enough to succeed with direct means of defense. Indirect means of protecting the self do work, more or less, as ways of handling the challenges that the world presents. However, the indirect coping strategies are all very costly. Numbing yourself with alcohol, or becoming fat, or isolating yourself from other people, or becoming abusive yourself—such indirect coping strategies are emotionally and/or physically harmful. More than that, planning your life on the basis of a belief in your own weakness keeps you weak. Responding like a victim creates opportunities to be victimized, and new victimization will reinforce the belief that you are a victim.

The way to break through the logjam of the indirect survival habits is to learn real power. Warmhearted power changes everything. Responding to a threat by speaking the truth, by voicing your feelings and needs, saying NO and making that stick—that is what renders the indirect coping strategies unnecessary. Being able to take direct action and succeed—for example, becoming capable of breaking the perpetrator's arm when he attempts to fondle you again—that is what creates real safety.

However, it is important that the power you acquire be loving. Power without love is brutal and abusive. Power with love is healing. Brutal power is harmful to the person who wields it. Abuse survivors will often reject all power because the only power they have ever seen is brutal, and they are repulsed by the idea of becoming anything like their abusers. There is such a thing as warmhearted, loving power, and it is the foundation for true humanity. Even self-defense actions, such as breaking a person's arm, can be done in a respectful, loving manner. We will work extensively with the integration of power and love in this book.

Practicing mastery of the actual situation of abuse is necessary. If you were yelled at, you need to keep breathing, maintain a focused posture, and tell a person who is yelling at you to stop. If you were slapped, you need to maintain a



state of relaxed alertness, actually stop a slap, and experience that you can physically control an attacker. If you were abandoned, you need to be able to speak your truth and take the practical steps necessary to survive your abandonment and find nurturance and connection.

You need to stay fully aware, relaxed, alert, and loving, and in that internal state practice actions of external mastery. That bonding of inner wholeness and outer mastery is what will allow a deep healing of old wounds. Letting your wounded child part participate along with your capable adult in reenacting the past and creating a better present response—that is what will enable you to move past the past.

Mastery cannot be superficial. It must go deep into the body. Abuse happens to the body and threatens the safety of the body. Obviously physical or sexual abuse are direct threats to the body. However, verbal and emotional abuse are also physical in that emotions are physical events. Emotions happen in the body and are stored in the body, sometimes producing somatic difficulties long after the abuse occurred. Mastery of both physical and emotional abuse means learning to overcome the body habits which were and continue to be the responses to your abuse.

Imagine someone who, as a little child, fell into the water and nearly drowned. He has a tremendous fear of water which is ruling his life. He can't take baths and he is afraid of puddles on the ground. Talking about the fear, exploring how it affects his life, gaining insight into the source of the fear—all of that is certainly important. But it won't finish up the fear. What will finish up the fear is for him to learn to swim. And not just gritting his teeth, suppressing his terror, and going through the motions of swimming. But finding his power and his joy, and in that state learning to swim and enjoy the mastery over the water.

For the new swimmer, finding the inner state of gentle power and love will free the body of tension and improve coordination and balance, so it is a prerequisite for truly successful swimming, and successful swimming will further open him to his power. Mastery over the water will also allow a deepening of his dialogue with his body. When he is not so afraid of the water, he will be better able to examine his feelings about the water and rediscover the past sources of present feelings and actions.

In the same way, confronting your old abuse from an inner state of joyful empowerment, and succeeding in mastering the old situation—that is what will allow you to escape from the chains of your abuse.

## **TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF**

The body is the focus of the teaching method I have developed because it is concrete, knowable and practical. The body is about living successfully in the world. Whatever other emotional or spiritual work you may do in your journey

of healing, the exercises and ideas contained in this book will add a crucial dimension to your process.

This introductory section introduces some of the basic ideas underlying the body work I do, but simply understanding the ideas of body awareness and mastery is very different from actually being aware of your body and becoming powerful. The rest of the book will consist of practical exercises which map out how to use body training as a path toward self-awareness and empowerment.

However, I would like to suggest a caution. Do only what and as much as feels right to you.

Survivors often find it scary to allow awareness back into their bodies. Doing the exercises is, of course, very physical and very real. You might find that a more intellectual, less physical approach would be a good place to start. Reading the book but not doing the exercises would allow you to gain an intellectual understanding of how the body can be incorporated into the healing process. That more intellectual approach might give you enough distance from the material that it would not seem overwhelming. Once you have an idea of what the whole process is, you could go back to the beginning of the book and start doing the exercises.

On the other hand, some people might find that just reading through the exercises and the descriptions of abuse in the book might be too upsetting unless they actually do the somatic exercises which would ground them and give them the strength to confront the material. Some people might find it best to practice the exercises with their psychotherapist or search out qualified practitioners of various forms of body process work to help them go through the work with some supervision.

However, most survivors will find reading this material and doing the exercises tremendously exhilarating and liberating. By discovering your awareness and your power and love, you will become willing and able to live in your body and allow previously banished thoughts, feelings, and memories to surface in safe ways. By living more fully in your body, you will find safe, effective and loving ways of living and acting in the world. It is possible. You can do it.

### KEY POINTS

- A traumatic event is an event that overwhelms the individual's coping and survival resources.
- The fundamental responses to trauma are physical constriction and body numbness, which act to suppress feelings of powerlessness, fear, anger, and pain.
- A crucial element in overcoming habitual trauma responses is gaining enough power to be able to dispense with the constriction and numbness.
- One aspect of empowerment involves learning skills of physical self-observation and control so that you can manage painful inner feelings. A sec-

ond aspect of empowerment involves learning to protect yourself from external threats.

- Working with the body is effective because the body is concrete and observable. Emotions are *physiological events in the body*, and *feelings* are what those physiological events feel like to the person who is doing them.

- Movement experiments represent survivors' issues in tangible, observable, scaled down, safe forms. Students practice noticing what is happening in their bodies as they respond to the challenges in the movement experiments. They use postural alignment, breath, and movement as a pathway toward power and love. And they use the integrated state of awareness, power, and love as a foundation for overcoming the challenges in the movement experiments.

- Learning and skill development are the core of the process described in this book. Once survivors can apply new skills in their lessons, they can then use the skills in their lives, and that is where healing happens.



## CHAPTER 2

# BEGINNING WITH POWER

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How can we get a practical handle on what abuse is and what its effects are? How can we begin to understand powerlessness and develop power? When I am faced with a puzzle, I try to create a movement experiment, a small-scale laboratory version of a big, real-life event. What we need to begin the investigation is a small piece of abuse. If it is minimal and small-scale, it will not cause unbearable stress, and it will be safe enough to study. But it must be real enough to arouse a response in you or there will be nothing to study.

### **THROWING TISSUES: EXPERIMENT**

This experiment will help you discover how you respond to abuse. For the exercise, you will need a partner. Your partner's job will be to stand about six feet (two meters) away from you and throw tissues at you.

If you absolutely can't find anyone to do the exercise with, just imagine having a partner throwing tissues at you. You will be able to do many of the empowerment exercises in this book without a partner even when the descriptions call for a partner, so not having a partner to practice with will not be an insurmountable problem.

Well, as abuse goes, being attacked with a tissue is really pretty minimal. For most people this attack is pretty tolerable. Most survivors (and non-survivors as well) find that this mostly symbolic gesture does arouse some fear, but since the "attack" is minimal, so is the fear. When you have a minimal attack, you can afford to take your time to study it and learn about your responses to it.

Calibration is important, however. The exercise must be matched to the student. I once worked with an ex-Green Beret soldier. As you can imagine, having tissues thrown at him didn't bother him at all. I had to increase the stimulus intensity *a lot* until we found an attack that was interesting for him to examine. In working with people who don't feel much, it is often necessary to increase the stimulus intensity so that they get a response large enough for them to notice. I might wet the tissue so it hits with a soggy and palpable thud. Or I might throw pillows instead of tissues. I wouldn't throw bricks, but I might surprise someone by picking up a brick and pretending that I was going to throw it.

On the other hand, I was once asked to come into a therapist's office to do a session with a client of hers. I walked in, and immediately walked out. The client was so scared that just my presence in the room was intolerable to her. I rummaged around the therapist's waiting room and found a blanket. I lay

down on the floor, covered myself with the blanket, crept up to the office door, and stuck my head in just a couple of inches (about five centimeters). We did the whole session with me in that position. I looked like such an idiot that I was hardly scary at all.

The point is to adjust the intensity of the “abuse” in this exercise so that it is tolerable and safe for you to examine. For most people that means revising the attack downward in intensity. If the gesture of throwing a real (though soft) object is too intense for you, then ask your partner to stand farther back so that the tissue doesn’t reach you. Perhaps having him turn around and throw the tissue in the wrong direction will help. Or ask him to do the movement of throwing a tissue, but with no tissue. Or have her tell you that she will throw a tissue, but not move to do so at all.

You get the point, I’m sure. The “attack” must be intense enough to arouse some response but so minimal that you will feel safe in examining your feelings of being unsafe.

Once you have chosen your preferred attack, have your partner attack you and notice what happens in response to the attack. Have your partner attack you a few times, so you have time to examine your reactions. What do you feel? What do you do? What do you want to do?

There are a number of common reactions to the attack with the tissue. People being hit often experience surprise or fear. They may feel invaded and invalidated. Frequently they tense themselves to resist the strike and the feelings it produces. Some people giggle uncontrollably or treat the attack as a game. Many people get angry and wish to hit back. People may freeze in shock or panic, and some people dissociate (space out).

In describing how they responded to the attack, most people talk about feelings as mental states. They were surprised, angry, afraid and so on. They wanted to escape or fight back. However, a very different way of paying attention to yourself is possible.

Notice the details of your muscle tone, breathing, body alignment, and the rhythms and qualities of movement. *Where* in your body do you feel significant changes? *What* are you *doing* in those locations? By paying attention to the physical details of your responses, you will begin to see more deeply into the ways you handle abuse. And learning to *notice* what you do is the first step in changing and improving what you do.

Notice what you do in your throat, belly and pelvis. What happens in your chest and back? Notice what you do in your face and head. Notice what you do with your arms/hands and legs/feet. What happens to your breathing? Is there anything else to pay attention to?

Most people notice that they tighten up when they are attacked. They may clench their shoulders or harden their chests. They most likely tense or stop their breathing. They may lean back or lean forward, but it is a tense movement. Sometimes this tension is fear, and people shrink away from the attack.

Sometimes this tension is anger, and people lean forward and wish to hit back. Do you do any of these things? Do you do something else?

Some people find that they get limp as a response to being hit. Their breathing and muscles sag; or they look away and space out, simply waiting for the hitting to be over. They may feel their awareness shrink down to a point or slide away into the distance.

Some people find the role of the attacker far harder than the role of the victim. Most people are not used to attacking people, and survivors especially often find it very difficult to use abusive force on another person. However, one idea might help make the attacker role easier for you. It will help to remember that your attack is a gift to your partner. By being concerned and benevolent enough to attack your partner, you are allowing them the opportunity to develop self-awareness skills. Without your gracious cooperation, they would not be able to learn these skills, and when they faced real threats in their lives they would be completely unprepared.

The common denominator among responses of tensing or getting limp is the process of getting smaller. Why do people tighten up or get limp? Why do you do it? Pay attention to your body as a way of paying attention to your feelings, and see whether an answer comes to you.

What does this experiment say about abuse and your response to it?

Before we analyze the meanings of the responses in this exercise, let's discuss a couple of things. First, in many of the exercises in this book, I talk about what "most people feel." That is a way of focusing the discussion on the responses and experiences which I have seen in my teaching to be most common. That doesn't mean that different responses or experiences are wrong. You may feel something different, and that is fine. If we were doing the exercises together, I could address the specific experiences you have, but in writing a book, I have to talk about what most people will usually feel. If you find yourself experiencing significantly different results in some exercise, that can be the starting point for heightened awareness of your particular movements and ways of being in your body.

Second, are you sure you felt what you were actually doing? It is very common for people to not notice very obvious movements and responses. Survivors of abuse have often spent years perfecting the skill of not noticing and not feeling. Even people who have not been abused but who have not deliberately developed the skill of being aware will miss physical responses that to an outside observer are perfectly obvious. Very often people will feel the opposite of what is actually going on in their bodies. Their habits are so strong that they don't know how to interpret the new sensations which come with new responses. In any case, with practice, people begin to be able to feel and notice what they are actually doing.

Perhaps all that you felt was *confused*. Try not to let it worry you. Many people feel confused when they begin body awareness training. It's so new and

different. Just keep on reading through the book and doing the exercises. If one exercise doesn't click for you, then another one will. As you get farther on in the book, it will make more and more sense to you. At some point, you might wish to go back to earlier exercises and try them again. As your sensitivity to and understanding of your body and the exercises increases, you will probably understand exercises that were confusing the first time around.

## THE MEANING OF SHRINKING

Whatever you did in the exercise, it was important. It would be easy to dismiss the various physical responses to the attack as being nothing but ordinary tension that anyone would experience. However, the forms that you choose for your body and your movements—whether consciously or subconsciously—are expressions of your sense of what you are and what the world is. By experimenting with simple movement situations, you can discover the nature of the beliefs and strategies that underlie your actions. You can evaluate the efficacy of your choices, discover why you have become committed to them, and try out new movements and new ways of approaching the world. This learning is what will lead to personal and spiritual change.

Body/movement work is for me a process of learning to feel and understand the internal consciousness map of one's body. The body method I have developed focuses on learning to sense in and through the body how choice or intention operates to give form to the body and to action. It is a way of learning to feel how thoughts, beliefs and feelings *shape* and are *shaped by* muscle tone, breathing, body alignment, energy flow, movement qualities, and the use of space. It is a way of using this awareness to integrate intellect, body and feelings. It is a way of creating an integrated state of power and love and using this state in healing old wounds and learning to live effectively in the present. And it all starts with paying attention to the details of breathing, muscle use and posture as your partner throws a tissue at you.

What message is contained in the movements you did, whether you tightened up or got limp? When people pay attention to their responses, they generally sense that the responses are ways of getting ready for the attack.

People experience that tensing is a way of bracing to get ready for the attack. In what sense is bracing a way of being *ready*? Imagine walking in a park. It's a quiet day. You're listening to the birds in the woods and watching the clouds in the sky. You are walking past a flag pole and you can hear the fluttering of the flag in the breeze. All of a sudden, the flag pole falls. Right toward you. You are about to be crushed.

By how far does the flag pole have to miss you for it to not hit you? A mile? A yard? A foot? An inch? Well, it won't hit you if it misses you by an inch (about 2 centimeters). A yard (a meter) might be better in case it bounces when it hits the ground.



Do you freeze in panic as you see the flagpole falling? But if you freeze, you're not ready to move. If you stop breathing or tighten up, your muscles and joints will be locked, which is not a good starting point for the simple action of stepping out of the way of the falling flag pole. If you are breathing with ease and comfort, and maintaining fluid flexibility in your muscles and posture, you are ready for dodging the falling flagpole.

Bracing is getting ready for *being hit*. Bracing is the manifestation of the belief that you are powerless to win so you might as well freeze and wait until the threat is over. Staying relaxed is getting ready for avoiding being hit. If you are relaxed as the flagpole falls, you can easily step away from its path. (For more on rigidity as a state of powerlessness, see the *Telephone Book Experiment* in Chapter 5.)

It is obvious that limpness is an acknowledgment of defeat. As people focus their attention on feeling the limp response, they very quickly sense that limpness is about giving up, knowing that there is nothing they can do so there is no reason to try anything.

Powerlessness is the hidden message in tension or limpness. Both ways in which people respond to the tissue attack contain a hidden belief that they cannot prevent getting hit. So they tighten up or get limp—and hope to survive the impact. Clearly this is what children, who truly are powerless, do to survive abuse.

## THE NATURE OF POWER

This book will focus on understanding powerlessness and learning to access power and ability that you never knew you had. The feeling and the reality of helplessness and powerlessness are the core of the wound created by abuse. The painful feelings that result from abuse cannot heal as long as you continue to be powerless.

In addition, many coping strategies that survivors develop are really expressions of powerlessness. Though they are effective as ways of coping with the abuse, they are nonetheless painful and costly. Useful but painful coping strategies cannot be eliminated as long as you continue to be powerless. The way to overcome dysfunctional coping strategies is to replace them with new options that are clearly more effective and more comfortable as survival tools.

Whatever feelings and behavior have resulted from your abuse, they have persisted because they seemed like the best or only way to handle the pain and survive. The goal of empowerment work is to learn how to create a centered, empowered state and use it in place of your habitual patterns of fear and weakness.

Powerlessness is constriction of breath, tensing of muscles, shrinking of posture. Powerlessness involves patterns of body sensation, posture and movement which are small and uneven. They are constricted or collapsed, and they are lopsided or twisted. Power is a state of expansiveness and symmetry. The empowered, centered state is open, bright, vigorous, soft, smooth, stable, fluid,

massive, light, balanced and even. This is at once a physical, emotional and spiritual state. Physical learning processes lead to a grasp of emotional and spiritual aspects of empowerment.

Power is the ability to control the environment in order to maintain one's safety and secure one's needs and desires. Power involves the elements of force and control. Power has to do with such qualities of body organization as solidity, weight, rootedness, resoluteness and tenacity. The body organization which gives rise to physical power is also the source of emotional and personal power and the capacity for powerful action in one's life.

Many people believe that power is by its essence bad. We have all heard that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The brutality and abusiveness that often pass for power are really just fear and weakness manifesting as hurtfulness. True power is not bad. True power is loving and nurturing. This is an important issue, and we will discuss it further. However, to be useful, any discussion must be founded on practical, concrete experience rather than mere ideas, so let's start working with exercises for developing power.

## **YOUR BELLY**

You can begin your mastery of power by developing an awareness of the core of your body.

### **RELAXING YOUR BELLY: EXPERIMENT & PRACTICE**

Get up for a moment and walk around. What does your belly feel like? Do you suck your gut in? Many people hold their bellies tense and sucked in. If you do, how does that affect your breathing?

How do you feel about your belly? Many people are ashamed of their bellies and try to hide them or make them look smaller.

In order to increase your awareness of how you hold the core of your body, consciously tighten your belly, anal sphincter muscles, and genitals and then walk around. Really grip those muscles hard. How does that affect your movement? Notice how stiff and strained this makes your legs, hips and lower back and your movement as a whole. Notice how restricted it makes your breathing.

By the way, as you try this exercise, notice whether your clothes are comfortably loose. If they are tight, there will be a constant pressure on your body. Your muscles will actually tense up and fight the pressure, whether you notice it or not, and it will be hard to relax your belly. As a general rule, in relaxation and in everything else that will be discussed in this book, it will help to wear loose, comfortable clothes.

Now, stand and alternate tightening your belly and relaxing it. When you relax it, let it plop out.

Next try releasing your belly—without doing a preliminary tightening. Whatever is your normal way of holding your belly, just let it plop down. Along with softening your belly, for greater relaxation, consciously allow your genital and anal muscles to relax. Was there tension to release even when you had not consciously tensed your belly? What does it feel like to let your belly relax fully?

Most people experience a noticeable release even when they had not first tightened their bellies consciously, and they realize from this that they had been unconsciously holding themselves tight and that they probably hold themselves tight all the time.

Try walking around again with your belly soft. How does that feel? Most people experience greater ease, fluidity, and solidity in their walk. And that is how walking should be—not tense and constricted. (Occasionally, people who are very stiff will experience discomfort when they relax their abdominal muscles. That is generally because they haven't relaxed and aligned the rest of their body when they relaxed their belly. If you are feeling such discomfort, as you go through the exercises in this book, you will feel more and more comfortable.)

Have you ever been told to suck in your gut? That's anatomical nonsense, though it seems to be a cultural imperative. Sucking in the gut produces a feeling of physical and emotional tension and constraint, though it may be so normal and familiar that it is never noticed. Why should we all be encouraged to do something which makes us stiff and weak? We have been taught that it looks trim and beautiful/handsome to keep the belly tense.

Think about it for a moment. When do we normally and naturally suck in our gut? When something startles us! Tensing and sucking in the belly is part of the fear/startle response. Isn't it strange that we are all encouraged to live in a permanent fear/startle pattern?

Holding tension in any area of your body makes all of your body uncomfortable, but the muscles in the belly, anus and genitals are especially important. They are the core of the body and the center of movement and balance. Holding tension in these body areas makes it impossible to relax and move freely, strongly and comfortably.

## LOOKING RIGHT

Right about now you might be getting a little worried. Am I really recommending letting your belly stay relaxed? Yes, I am. I know that for many people talking about the body or feeling it is uncomfortable. In our culture, the body is often seen as “bad.” The belly is bad. Everyone wants to have a flat belly, to get rid of it. Even worse is talking about the pelvis, the genitals and the anal sphincter muscles. Those are our “private” areas, and it's not polite to talk about them.

One time, at a hospital, I presented a workshop concerning the prevention of computer-related stress and movement injuries. (That was the topic of my first book, *Comfort at Your Computer*.) There are many people who spend hours

every day working at computers, and frequently they develop serious wrist, neck or back problems from incorrect postural habits. Arranging the pelvis and spinal column correctly is the basis for safe, comfortable sitting. So I did the exercise we just did here, and a few others focusing on proper functioning of the pelvis. No big deal, right?

There were twenty-one participants in the workshop, and twenty handed in evaluations. All twenty rated the workshop as excellent. The next day, the hospital administrator who was responsible for putting on the workshop got a phone call from an employer who had sent six of the participants. He said all six felt the workshop was terrible and wanted their money back.

The administrator pointed out that at least five of them had rated the workshop as excellent. After a lot of talking, it came down to this: I had talked about the pelvis and actually had the workshop participants clench and release their genital and anal sphincter muscles. The employer felt that was so totally improper that he wanted his money back.

It is not OK in our culture to talk about the body core. It is not OK to have a naturally rounded, relaxed belly. Suck it in! Pull it up!! But look at babies. Their tummies are soft and free, and that is the anatomically natural way to be.

It is even harder for abuse survivors to talk about the body core. Many survivors of sexual abuse had their pelvises invaded, and they experienced sexuality and sexual arousal as intrusive and demeaning. Even survivors of non-sexual abuse often shut down their body core to suppress gut feelings of fear and anger, and they too don't want to focus attention on a place where they may keep a lot of strong emotion.

More than just *talking* about the pelvic area, many survivors don't want to *feel* that area of the body. There is so much pain associated with it that they just want it to go away. Even worse, allowing the genitals and anus to relax, open up and get wide feels intolerably vulnerable and penetrable.

However, using the belly/pelvis properly is crucial in finding your wholeness and your strength. You cannot become whole if you leave out big parts of your body. If talking about this area of the body makes you uncomfortable, that emotional discomfort will translate directly into physical tension in the muscles of your pelvis and belly, which will interfere with your ability to feel, move and act with sensitivity and strength. What we are doing here is just instruction in the basic anatomy and engineering of the body. If you want the "machine" to run right, you have to make sure all its parts are adjusted correctly.

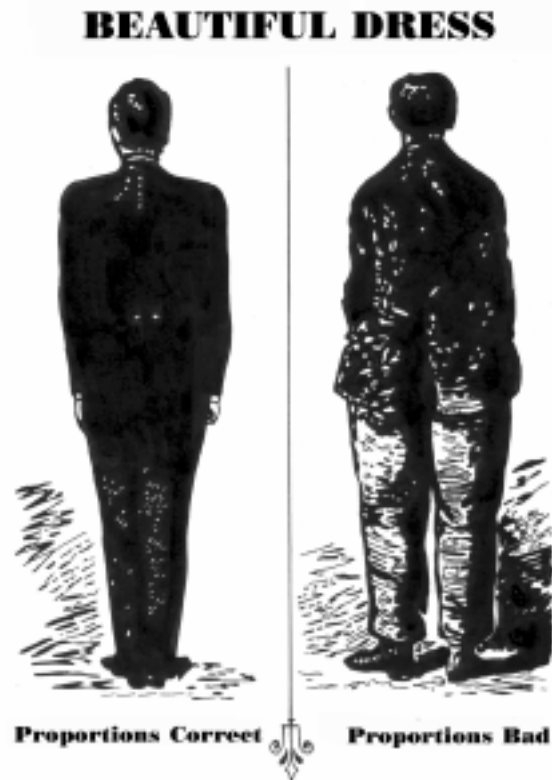
If the *Relaxing Your Belly* exercise makes you uncomfortable (or arouses terror or tears), just hang on for a little while. First we will look further at the general cultural attitude toward the belly, and after that we will do some exercises to give you new tools which will help with your discomfort.

Many people find the idea of letting their bellies relax to be totally unacceptable. Our culture has very specific ideas about how the body should be used and what makes a person nice to look at. Relaxing the belly is just *not* the thing to do! But let's take a look at some drawings. They are drawings of figures from

advertisements that appeared in various places. Looking at ads is a good way of examining our culture's values. The way advertisements show the body exemplifies our culture's ideals of strength and beauty, and I suspect advertisements go a long way toward shaping our ideals as well. Ads are effective when they tap

into our ideals, and also they offer role models which shape them.

This first drawing was copied from a cookie wrapper and is a good illustration of the way we think about the body. When I show this to people in workshops, the overwhelming majority agree that the figure on the left labeled "correct" does indeed look much better than the "bad" figure on the right. However, when I ask which man could more easily dodge a car that was heading right for him, almost everyone will choose the



"bad" figure. People easily recognize that the so-called bad figure is more relaxed, balanced and ready to move, but they have learned to believe that the tense, constricted, top-heavy, immobile figure is *good*.

This identification of beauty and power with tension can be seen in the second drawing as well. There is obvious tension in the face, the cock of the hips, and the wide stance. The advertisement text that went with the photograph was: "For the coolest guys only, tough new urban hardwear: just what you need to carry off a confident attitude." The verbal message reinforces the equivalence of power and tension by defining "cool" and "confident" as "tough" and stemming from hardness. There is an air of angry sexuality about the ad. The irony is that the man's stance is tense and immobile, just



what would prevent him from moving easily and powerfully if he did have to fight off or escape from some attack. In particular, there is so much tension in the pelvis that free and pleasurable movement there would probably be impossible too.

Women too have their stylized ways of doing tension. Look at the next drawing. The text in the ad asked “What makes a swimsuit sexy?” And the answer was “Lots of beautiful shape.” However, look at what is passed off as beautiful shape. Standing on high heels, the woman’s feet are not in contact with the ground. Her knees, hips and low back are locked and rigid. Her left arm is held back in an awkward and tense position. (Try standing that way and see how you feel.) Her neck and face are tense. She is bound and rigid, without the softness that would allow her to move in the supple, balanced way that is the basis of grace and power. And yet when I show this photograph in workshops, people initially perceive the model as looking beautiful. Perhaps I am unusual, but I enjoy looking at people who are free, relaxed, powerful and graceful. I don’t find tension, awkwardness and weakness at all beautiful.



Many ads showing women equate tension with beauty and strength, much as men’s ads do. There is, however, a second category of women’s poses, and that is, for lack of a better term, the *sex kitten* pose. In this pose, women hold weak, twisted positions, intertwining messages of helplessness and seductiveness. Again, most people I show this fourth drawing to see the woman as beautiful and seductive. My first thought when I saw the ad this came from was that the woman probably had low back problems. Notice how her head, neck, back, hips and legs are held in curves which totally undermine

the body's support structure. Nothing sits squarely atop anything. There is no foundation for stability or strength.

Just for comparison, examine this photograph I took of my son when he was about four years old. This photo shows how young children typically sit. The photo was spontaneous and unposed. It shows the anatomically normal way to sit, which most adults have lost. Notice how effortlessly straight my son holds his body. Rather than slumping over to look at the book he is reading, he rotates his head on top of his spinal column, maintaining graceful, efficient weight support while aiming his eyes downward. Notice that his shoulders are relaxed and rounded, his chest soft, and his belly released. This is very close to what the



*A postural ideal*

cookie wrapper defined as “proportions bad,” yet it is supple, graceful, strong and balanced.

Our culture places trimness before us as the ideal of beauty, but if you look under the skin of that idea, trimness turns out to be another name for tension. Certainly exercising and being in good shape are good for you and are part of looking good. If you exercise and are in good shape, your belly and all the rest of you will be well-toned. However, the artificial trimness of postural tension and deliberate sucking in of the gut is not the same as being well-toned, and it is not good for you.

Sucking in your gut creates tension and weakness throughout the body. (See *Tensing Parts Experiment* in Chapter 5 for more on this.) If you bring that dedication to tension with you to the task of recovering your strength and wholeness, you will be taking two steps back and one step forward. In order to become whole, you need to be willing to feel how your body operates and do what will make you truly relaxed and comfortable.

Almost always when I teach about relaxing the belly and letting it plop out, I must spend time combating the notion that sucking in the gut looks better. People very quickly feel for themselves that they breathe and move more easily when they let their bellies out, but often they feel fat and sloppy. They feel embarrassed to go out in public looking relaxed and balanced. For many people it takes a good deal of practice to feel comfortable with being comfortable.

When I teach about relaxation, a question that always comes up is about the difference between relaxation and limpness. Relaxation is not just limpness, though many people think of it that way. I would prefer to define *relaxation* as using only the effort appropriate to the task at hand. If you use one hundred pounds of effort to pick up a fifty pound weight, that is tense and unrelaxed. If you use only fifty pounds of effort, then you are as relaxed as you can possibly be while still getting the job done. If you are lying in the sun with your eyes closed, listening to the birds, resting and dreaming—and expending twenty pounds of effort in your muscles—that certainly is not relaxed. It is more work than the task needs.

Many people think of limpness as the reward for exertion. They are either working all out or resting all out. But they don't monitor their internal processes as they move and act, in order to move efficiently, strongly and gracefully. Empowerment, not limpness, is the goal of the relaxation training that *Winning is Healing* provides.

#### **RIGIDITY AND COLLAPSE: EXPERIMENT**

Stand up. Notice how you are standing. Now stand up tall and *straight!* Suck in your belly. Throw back your shoulders and raise your chest.

Now collapse. Don't fall down on the floor. Just let your shoulders round forward and collapse. Let your head fall down. Let all your muscles sag. How does that feel?

Notice that in both tensing and collapsing, certain areas of your body experience a good deal of compression and strain. Both tensing and collapsing must be avoided. As you will experience in the following chapters, real relaxation comes from strong, active, effective body use, not from limpness and collapse. Strength is not rigid, and relaxation is not limp.

When stressful situations arise, we tend to get tense and resistant, which compresses the body. However, collapse is also a frequent response, and it too produces compression. Collapse is a process of surrender, of limp letting go. The body hangs on itself because there is no energy or will to move.

Tension and limpness are not opposites. They are two extremes of essentially the same process of powerlessness and inability to handle difficult situations with ease and effectiveness. As ways of life, both tension and limpness are wrong. What is needed for wholeness is a relaxed, energized and alert way of being and moving, and that is what you are learning in this book.



## BREATHING

Breathing is a crucial element in the skill of alert relaxation. Breathing is an odd activity. It is something which normally is involuntary and automatic but which is easily controlled consciously. It is a fundamental process in both rest and fight-or-flight activity. By breathing during fight-or-flight actions in a manner that is involved in rest, you can actually balance yourself between the stable state of rest and the alert state of emergency activity. You can keep your mind and body relaxed and alert and ready to deal with the problems confronting you.

And if the discussion and exercises concerning the belly and pelvis have made you feel anxious, relaxing your breathing will help you let go of the anxiety. Actually, a major purpose for relaxing your belly was to prepare you for relaxing your breathing.

### AWARENESS OF YOUR BREATHING: EXPERIMENT

I am quite sure that you are breathing as you read this. But are you aware of *how* you are breathing?

What parts of your body move as you breathe in? Do you feel movement, however great or slight, in your chest, belly, back, neck, legs, or arms? What about in your face? Or anywhere else? Where do you feel the most and least movement?

What parts of your body move as you breathe out?

What are the movements of inhalation and exhalation like? Are they steady, uninterrupted and flowing? Are there stops and starts? Does one part of your breath feel more or less tense than another?

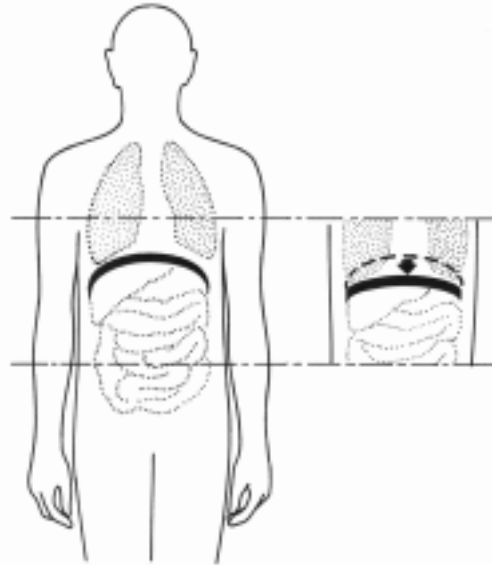


Before you learn the following breathing and relaxation exercise, you need to know some facts about how breathing actually works. The first fact is that the lungs don't do the movements of breathing. The lungs are passive sacks that allow contact between the blood and the air so that oxygen can be taken in and carbon dioxide given off.

So, if the lungs don't do the movements of breathing, what does? Imagine taking a bottle, cutting the bottom off, and taping a balloon onto the bottom. Now imagine pinching the balloon and pulling down on it. That would pull some air in through the neck of the bottle. Next imagine releasing the balloon. The balloon would spring back and the air would puff out.

That is how breathing works. There is a muscle called the diaphragm. It is a dome-shaped muscle in the chest which functions much as the balloon does on the bottle. It is dome-shaped when it is relaxed. When it tenses, it pulls tight, flattens out and pushes down. That is the equivalent of the balloon being pulled down, and it is that action of the diaphragm which sucks air into the lungs.

The key point is that there is a bunch of stuff below the diaphragm—the stomach and intestines and such—and that all has to go somewhere when the dia-



*Action of the diaphragm*

phragm pushes down. Flesh is pretty much incompressible, so it can't be squeezed smaller. It can't move up, of course, and it also can't move down. Down below is the pelvis and the web of muscles that comprises the floor of the pelvis.

Have you ever watched a baby breathe? When babies inhale, what happens to their tummies? They expand. When the diaphragm pushes down, everything below is displaced outward, primarily to the front where the abdominal muscles can allow movement (but to some extent to the sides and back since the rib cage allows some movement there as well). This is how infants breathe, and it is the anatomically natural way to breathe, but it is not how most adults breathe.

*Stand tall. Throw back your shoulders. Suck in your gut!* We are taught to breathe wrong! When will someone naturally throw back their shoulders, elevate their chest, inhale, and suck in their gut? When they are startled and scared. Americans have enshrined the fear-startle response as their idea of the right way to breathe.

I wonder whether this is related to the high incidence of child abuse in our society. A very conservative estimate would suggest that twenty-five percent of our children are physically and/or sexually abused, emotionally abused, neglected or living in poverty. Actually I have seen estimates that almost fifty percent of girls and thirty percent of boys are sexually abused, and that doesn't include the numbers of children who are otherwise abused or neglected, but let's be very conservative and go with an overall twenty-five percent figure. That's a lot of kids! And there are a lot of adults who, whether they know it or not, feel the pain and terror of being an abuse perpetrator.

The fear-startle response is the body's response to pain and fear, and people who are abused or who abuse others get stuck in the moment of abuse. In other words, their bodies continue to live in the fear-startle response until they heal.

Maybe we have come to think the fear-startle response is normal, and even desirable, because all around us everyone is doing it. It has come to look right to us. We will look at this more after the next exercise, and later on in relation to the dissociative process.

Now you know why we started this section by paying attention to relaxing the belly. It is important in reducing body tension and in setting the stage for the breathing exercise which follows.

### **SOFT BREATHING: PRACTICE**

Stand up. Now, touch your belly and notice whether you suck in your belly or let it expand when you inhale. Then touch your low back, and touch your chest. Do they expand when you inhale?

Let your belly relax, and keep it relaxed as you inhale. Let the air fall gently down into your tummy as you inhale, and let your tummy expand. (Of course the *air* stays in your lungs, but this image will help you feel the *movement* all the way down into your belly.) Your belly should be the focal point of your breathing, but it is important to let your chest and back also swell gently as you inhale.

Compressing your belly as you inhale rigidifies your chest and belly and back and creates a lot of tension in your body. However, if you have gotten used to sucking in your gut as you inhale, breathing in a more relaxed manner will feel strange. At first you may even have the strange sensation that it feels physically better to breathe from your belly, but it is so unfamiliar that it feels uncomfortable to breathe more comfortably.

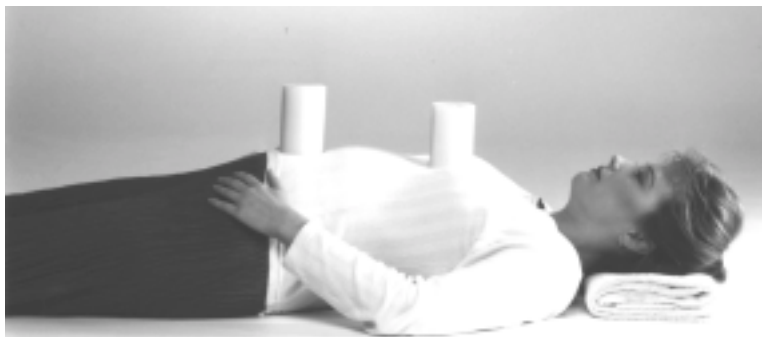
If expanding and inhaling is difficult, at first you may have to deliberately push your belly out as you inhale just to get the rhythm. Later you can give up this extra effort.

Some people find it very hard to figure out how to either expand or push out their bellies. A way to help with this is to lie down on your back, with pillows under your head and knees, put a fist sized stone (or something similar) on your belly just below your belly button, and concentrate on raising the stone by inhaling. Sometimes it helps to physically push the stone upward and then keep your tummy up while you inhale. Pushing up may take some effort, but eventually you should find a non-effortful way of expanding your tummy.

Try walking around as you breathe from your belly. How does that movement feel?



*Chest breathing*



*Belly breathing*

Done properly, breathing and expanding is very relaxing. Breathing is supposed to be a gentle, internal massage, and it is very comfortable when it is. Most people, when they try walking or doing other movements in the overall state of pelvic release and soft breathing, feel that their movement is easier, better balanced, more graceful, more coordinated and much more solidly connected to the ground.

#### **THROWING TISSUES II: EXPERIMENT**

Let's go back to the tissue attack. It will be the same exercise but there will be one difference: as your partner throws the tissues at you, use what you have just learned about breathing. Relax your belly, let your breathing come from the core of your belly, and whatever your partner may do with the tissues, keep your breathing soft and steady.

You can try breathing this way when you act the role of the attacker as well.

What do you notice? How do you feel? What difference does steadying your breathing make?

Most people notice that they receive the attack very differently when they keep their breathing soft. The attack no longer seems so threatening. They don't react with constriction, fear or anger. Most people experience that when they stay soft, they don't dislike the attacker but can maintain a spirit of calmness. The attack becomes just an event to deal with.

As the attacker, most people experience that throwing the tissues becomes a less hate-filled act. It becomes just an action to be done.

In other words, steadying the breathing takes a lot of the emotion out of the attack. It reduces the attack to an event to be worked with. And it gives the defender the calmness and presence of mind that you will see later are the foundation for effective self-protection and healing.

Of course, you may not have had these results from the breathing. That's OK too. Whatever results you had are the truth of your present ways of being and doing, and they are legitimate and something to study and understand. As we go farther in the book, a large variety of different responses will be discussed, and the large variety of exercises will give each person an opportunity to work with their own unique responses.

In particular, you may not have been ready to use the breathing exercises successfully and may have needed more work before you could steady yourself and reduce the effect of the attack. However, my experience teaching many thousands of people these and other similar exercises suggests that most people will have been successful with this breathing exercise.

For many people this will have been their first experience of *ability*. I have seen many people fill with a sense of exhilaration and freedom when they realize that they do not have to stay trapped in weakness and fear, that they can in fact find strong and safe ways of being and living.

The point of this chapter was to give you your first experience of using body processes to change a response to an assault. You have had your first experience of a state of empowerment and wholeness which will allow you to move forward in your healing from your abuse. The rest of the book will continue to help you work with new elements of awareness, empowerment, love and safety.

You can do it. You can create changes that you might have thought impossible. The simple exercises you have already done are the beginning of mastery.

### KEY POINTS

- Common reactions to an attack include surprise, shock, fear, and anger. Identifying the physical concomitants of those emotional states is important. *Where* in your body do you feel significant changes? *What* are you doing in those locations?

- It is important to notice the details of your muscle tone, breathing, body alignment, and the rhythms and qualities of movement. Key areas to pay attention to are the throat, chest, belly, and pelvis.

- Watch for hardness, constriction, shrinking, or limpness in your muscles and posture. Watch for tension in your breathing. Smallness, whether it is hard constriction or soft limpness, is about powerlessness. Getting ready for an attack by getting small is really getting ready to endure losing.

- Tensing the belly to look trim is really just buying into a viewpoint of body alienation, fear, and anger.

- Power is the ability to control the environment in order to maintain your safety and secure your needs and desires. Power, whether physical or emotional, has to do with such qualities of body organization as solidity, weight, rootedness, resoluteness and tenacity.

- **RELAXING YOUR BELLY & SOFT BREATHING PRACTICES:** These are two key exercises to do on an ongoing basis. Once your belly is relaxed, you can breathe naturally and fully. When you inhale, allow your tummy to be the focus of the movement, and allow your belly, chest, and back to swell gently.

- Continuing to breathe fully while meeting an attack will allow you to respond more calmly and effectively.