

CENTRING



WHY MINDFULNESS
ALONE ISN'T ENOUGH

MARK WALSH

Centring

why mindfulness alone isn't enough
2nd edition

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

by Mark Walsh and other members of the [Embodiment Unlimited](#)
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-five 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 [Certification of Embodiment Coaching](#), Embodied Facilitator Course and [Embodiment Unlimited](#) communities, who have helped me develop my understanding of centring through years of teaching, experimentation and practical application.

Colleagues like Francis Briers, Alexandra Vilvovskaya and Christina Dohr were particularly helpful, as was hosting over 600 podcasts and dozens of summits with over 1000 different teachers! Also to Anouk Brack for her contribution, along with Steve New for the extensive editing of this second edition and Kristina Ivanova for the new cover.

Thank you all!

Mark Walsh, May 2024
Frome, 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”¹ is the overall term used for the self-regulation skills that work with the body. At its 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-five years ago, and for the last fifteen years have been teaching it to business leaders in boardrooms, humanitarians in war zones, and to trainers and coaches in over 40 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.

¹ Also spelt “centering” in the USA

This book will outline what centring is and the biology behind it, giving 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 is likely the most compressive written guide to centring that exists, 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). However, centring also includes techniques for regulating ourselves to greater alertness and stimulation (up-regulation), and techniques for shifting state without reference to arousal level. There’ll be more on



fight, flight and other related terms later.

Creating any desired change to your state could also be called "centring" in a very extended sense, but I don't use it this 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, which can be a very different 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 yang²) "centre" can be seen as the balanced mid-point. 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" an "we" aspects). Centring involves methods, and creates results, that are subjective, objective and intersubjective, involving the body-mind, behaviour and relationships.

² Four 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.

Master centring teacher, Paul Linden³ gives one excellent definition of centring:

“Centring 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.

The centred 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 centring needs to be learned and practised, and it needs to be engaged in voluntarily and

³ I’m going to refer to Paul’s work numerous times, so you may like to check out his website, which has A LOT of free resources:

<https://www.being-in-movement.com/>

deliberately. The key to centring 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? Alternatively, what's the difference between your good and bad moments within a day.

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 SCEPTICAL – 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. Many martial arts work with it, either implicitly or explicitly.

Since then, I have taught centring everywhere from war-zones, to classrooms, to boardrooms, and 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's regularly assessed in feedback as the best "quick win" on facilitation, business leadership, time-management and stress-management courses that I run.

Coaches also 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, and 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 sceptical, 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, so start with those.

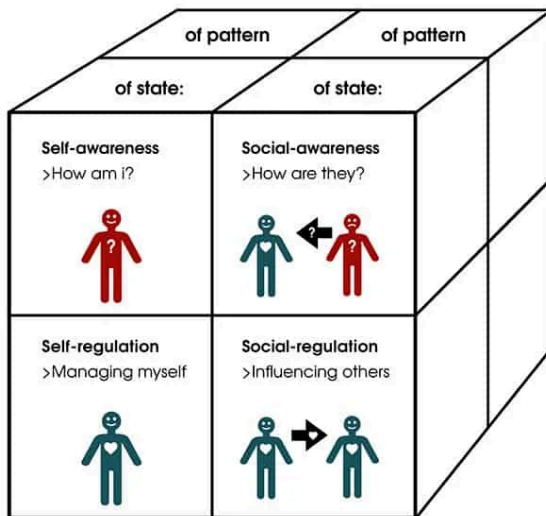
It's important that you make this learning personal to get the most from it. Sharing these ideas and chatting over with people will also help, as will a review schedule, but you may already know all of that. If that's the case, consider this as a gentle reminder to apply what you know about skills acquisition 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 [Certification of Embodiment Coaching](#), 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). In my experience, seeing it as a set of motor skills like any other, and not esoteric magic, is a useful frame for learning.

EMBODIED INTELLIGENCE



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. 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 or so years.

CENTRING STORIES

Centring has been an integral part of my life now for over 25 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.

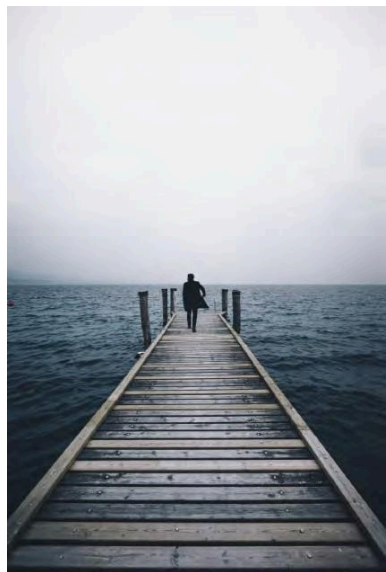
To illustrate some of the beauty and utility of centring I want to tell a few stories from my life. It's actually hard to know where to begin, since centring has been involved in almost every major event in a helpful way!

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. 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, as I lacked 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). I was drinking alcoholically and was suicidally depressed. I was smart enough to see that there were some important ways I was not so smart.

Thankfully, I survived a last Summer there by 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 long-term home in 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).

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. I have heard feedback from numerous humanitarian aid workers that I trained pre-deployment or in the field whilst working in areas of starvation, torture, mass-rape and war, of how it has helped them to 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.

A nice story that I can share is from Sierra Leone. I was working with both soldiers and "mummy 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 misjudged 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.

More recently, I taught centring while setting up the Sane Ukraine trauma education charity in Lviv, and the team have taught it to tens of thousands of people around the country now. I wouldn't necessarily recommend having missiles shot at you as a way of practising, or bomb shelters as training rooms, but it's all part of the experience that's gone into this body of work!

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 to quickly get 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. Oops (don't worry, we recentred and said that while it was terribly nice of him to offer, we'd rather have the person left alive). There are also 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 emails, 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 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... The list goes on.

While it's the war-stories of centring and naming famous past clients like L'Oreal, Google, 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 over the years, along with [CEC](#) and Sane Ukraine students so that it can continue to be taught to many more. Online videos of centring that we've created have over 2 million hits on [Instagram](#), 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, but 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 their 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 starlet 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 [Certificate of Embodiment Coaching](#) students have taken it in their own direction. That's the beauty of a principles-based approach – people can 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 directions⁴.

⁴ See also the real world applications section later in this book, along with Paul Linden's "Breakfast Essays" book of embodiment stories if you like this kind of thing.

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 the later chapter on this).

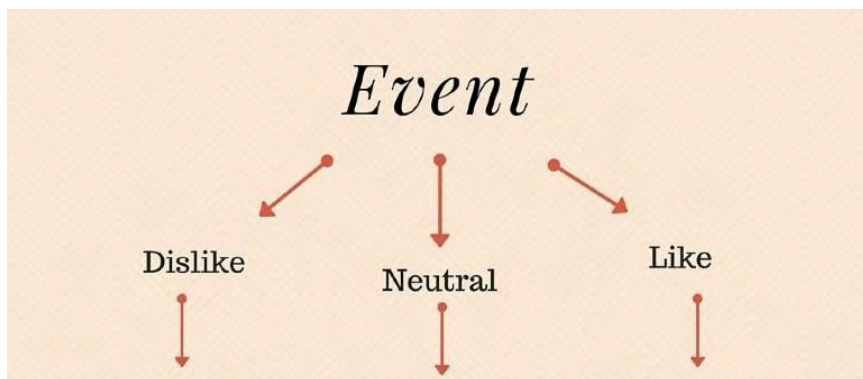
Some relationships get to the stage when centring becomes very difficult, and at least once a month I belatedly catch myself losing it and feel embarrassed to be an embodiment teacher. Well, at least I catch myself sometimes!

I 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 easy 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.



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, 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. BDSM is 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, 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 or 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 inbuilt 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, hindering (not helping) 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!”), but the physical response may or may not be. For example, adrenaline could kick-in to supercharge the system, or stress may cause the muscles to contract and breathing to stop, both of which can actually stop us moving quickly, leaving us stuck as the proverbial “rabbit in the headlight” in this case.

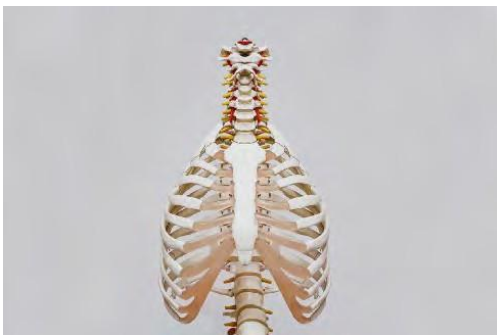
In the modern world, most stressors do not require the responses that evolution has endowed us with. It is unlikely that you are going to actually fight with or run away from (flight) your boss or partner, for example. That means we have a problem – what can we do with this now unhelpful arousal?

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 flight⁵. Robert Sapolsky's "Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers" is great for more on this.

In the short term, people react in less intelligent, less creative and less kind ways when 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 in quite a different way. The balancing aspect of the autonomic (unconscious) parasympathetic function is sometimes called the

⁵ As a side note, if one is really pursuing excellence in fighting or running, the old reactions are actually unhelpful. We know from the martial arts and athletics that even where actual fighting or fighting is involved, the left-over vestibular responses we have are mostly unhelpful. Watch any great athlete, and you'll see 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. There are many more examples, too.

"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 I think this is a mistake, as in the short term all genders exhibit a limited range of classic fight-flight-freeze-fawn responses. I'd 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 in many cultures are 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. If you're interested in exploring this, you may like my [People Un-Pleasing book](#), and I'll also cover more on "towards" when we look at social centring later.

There are also superficial similarities between sexual arousal and fight-flight – increased heart rate and reduced in neocortical activity, for example – so 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), and the latter has two aspects that interact in complex ways. There is also the slower-working but powerful hormonal system. There's a section from Anouk Brack on biology below for those that are interested.

TRAUMA AND FIGHT-FLIGHT-FREEZE-FOLD

Much could be said about trauma. A connection we could make 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, whilst others like emotional numbing, learnt helplessness and sexual or relationship difficulties linked to freeze-fold. 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

Any distress or eustress reaction interferes 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 or unbalanced
- **Imagination:** we become habitual, not conscious, in what we picture and predict
- **Relaxation:** we tense up and contract
- **Structure:** we can collapse, twist or go off-balance
- **Movement** (including breathing): we can lose freedom and energy
- **Responsiveness:** we close down or respond ineffectively to others

Centring can restore each of these, allowing us to choose rather than be enslaved to acquired habit and maladaptive genetics. However, being able to centre does rely upon some awareness of being present or we wouldn't know that we need to use any technique!

As ever in embodied work, awareness and choice are central, and "enabling choice over oneself" is another broad definition of centring. Because the FFFF response is itself toxic to self-awareness (it numbs us to what we need to notice), centring is most easily employed when we "catch ourselves" in the early stages of a reaction, before we become blind to what we need to change. Centring techniques therefore need to be practised repeatedly before we're in a challenging situation so that they become second-nature and can be done early enough.

The two main varieties of distress reactions, based upon your body increasing or reducing arousal levels under pressure, are hyper-reaction and hypo-reaction.

HYPER REACTION

This means increased arousal, or excess yang – fire and air – metaphorically. It's fight and flight.

“Fight” or “flight” both involve holding and contraction of muscles and breath, and therefore less relaxation and freedom of movement. They're also off-balancing and lead to a 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. focusing on and lengthening the exhale.

HYPO REACTION

This means reduced arousal, or excess yin – water and earth – metaphorically. It's 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. This is nearly always maladaptive in a modern context, although for trauma survivors 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. focusing on and lengthening the inhale.

Both hyper- and hypo- responses are primitive animal instincts. There are other less primitive and socially mediated versions of hyper- and hypo- 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

This involves moderate arousal – the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems are in balance. Here you can flow, feel and ~~fink~~ think (sorry, “think” is not an “f” 😊).

Here, one may be attentive, curious, focused, relaxed, well-structured, balanced, free and energised to move. Critically, this also enables relationship. Many people confuse hyper-arousal with this “flow, feel and fink” response.

EUSTRESS AND PLEASURE CENTRING

Far less well known is than 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, as it mostly operates in quite a subtle manner, 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 more obvious when severe addictions cause tension, a loss of freedom, relationship difficulties, misery, and reduced functionality. The addict, both in body-mind and behaviour, is simply acting out a more extreme version of any off-centre behaviour linked to pleasure and the eustress reaction. We all have mini-compulsions and tensions around what we want daily.



The eustress response is actually subtly unpleasant. We seek to relieve it by 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, along with 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 I know, I'm 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 tends 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 that's 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.

You can find more on [pleasure centring on this video](#).

Clare Myatt's adds a piece 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 actions to these which are physiologically incompatible with the distress (or eustress) response and reduce it through direct biological means.

It is worth reminding ourselves at this point that acceptance is necessary before any change, and a certain amount of “being with” is necessary before undoing any stress response, which is there to bring us information about potential threats after all.

The sense of this 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. There’ll be 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. Two examples are listening 360 degrees and “opening” your vision to make it more peripheral. There are advantages to this type of “external” centring for people who are traumatised and find the body a dangerous place to go.

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.

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.

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 too, 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 40+ countries, along 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 are most expressed, along with various theories as to how stress responses are ordered.

For example, a common order of response is that people will freeze at first briefly when under pressure, then try and flee, then fight if they cannot, and then eventually fold if it's ongoing. Evolutionarily, it makes sense that an animal when threatened 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 (there's 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 I think it's best to study one's own reactions without expectation, and to 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, which was triggered 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. Without effective centring under pressure at work, I can get pushy, whilst my colleague can get quietly grumpy. Others have a withdrawal pattern that's different again, so it can be really useful to know the patterns and "early warning signs" of those you're around daily so you can maintain harmonious relationships.

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

A CULTURE OF REACTIVITY?

While we've been 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, there is a strong case to be made

that we live in a fight-flight culture. The fast pace, noise, population density, tech use, family structure, workload, media-bias, recreation cultures, along with many other factors of the modern world, mean most of us are constantly in a mild state of reactive arousal. This can mean that 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 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, along with other factors, make mindfulness difficult, let alone self-regulation.

A political reading of this physiological situation would suggest that there are those who benefit from this reactive culture, offering 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. Since the first edition of this book in 2017, this has only increased, especially in regard to agitating technologies, and the general zeitgeist.

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 even difficult years, 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 can even be intergenerational, for example in the descendants of holocaust survivors⁶.

Reflection exercise

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

GENERAL RELAXATION FACTORS THAT LOWER 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:

- **Safety:** If we are not physically safe, either in reality, in a cultural sense through bodily dispositions or unconscious narratives ("life is dangerous"), or even intergenerationally (I have seen the latter in Israel, for example), then we will not be relaxed. This becomes apparent when working with groups

⁶ see the work of Gabor Maté, for example

who live in dangerous places, like humanitarian aid workers, or people who are around danger in otherwise safe societies, like emergency responders.

- **Community:** We are social animals, so high levels of social support, appreciation, affection and respect are some of the most significant resilience factors across many groups. Groups with good social support, like many soldiers or fire personnel, can cope with a lot, while those who feel isolated can cope with very little. Belonging is soothing. See “social centring” for more on this.
- **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 whilst high protein and complex vegetable carbohydrates more "grounding".
- **Stimulants:** Due to their effect on the adrenals, stimulants like nicotine and caffeine put us closer to a FFF response. I've found this to be a particularly important variable when working with corporate cases of anger management.
- **Familiarity:** Being around strangers (e.g. when commuting) and living within cities can be stressful to our tribal minds, which see people we don't know as threatening.
- **Touch:** Three hugs a day for survival, ten for growth (I made that up, but you get the point). Firm non-sexual touch is the most relaxing, whilst 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.
- **Water:** Hot baths, showers and being around water generally helps. “Blue spaces”.
- **Lighting:** More natural light and lower levels of artificial light – think lunch-time walks outside and candles or colour-appropriate lamps in the evening.

-
- **Noise:** Lower noise levels. Background noise, such as in open-plan offices, is stressful.
 - **Exercise:** Get some.
 - **Nature:** Enjoy time in nature, especially open space (think nice views), being by water (it's not just the drugs that make Amsterdam relaxing), and green plants (research shows even one office plant can help people relax and be more creative, for example).⁷

MEANING MAKING

As organisms, humans are more future- and past-orientated than many animals. That makes meaning-making a key when considering human stress.

What an event means is central to how stressful it is, whether that be straightforward or more symbolic. For example, a small trigger like a “dirty look” can have a lot of perceived meaning.

Symbolism, too, can be surprisingly powerful. For example, 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. The same light the day before hadn't bothered her.

Identity is also critical in stress – someone losing a job that is central to their conception of themselves is an example of this.

⁷ See Dr. Roger S. Ulrich of Texas A&M University; Helen Russell, Surrey University, England; the recent studies conducted by Dr. Virginia Lohr of Washington State University that plants significantly lower workplace stress and enhance productivity.

A deeper look at the biology of fight-flight and centring

This section is by Anouk Brack, a Leadership Embodiment trainer with an MSc. in biology), with editing from me (Mark).

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 practising new behaviours (adaptation, or intention). This will increase our capacity to influence our responses to challenging situations. Centring 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 centring on our physiological state of being in the moment.

Reality is always more complicated than a few words on paper, and here I'll attempt to keep it understandable for nonbiologists, bring some nuance and bust 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
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 (sympathetic, parasympathetic and somatic) run all through the body. Blood vessels run all through the body from and to the heart. Nerves do similarly, running 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). The CNS is the central hub of our nervous system and consists of the brain and the spinal cord. The “peripheral” in PNS refers to it as being located “towards the outside” as viewed from the brain and along the body's vertical axis.

Following is an overview of the entire nervous system and its components:

Nervous system:

Central nervous system (CNS)

Brain

Spinal cord

Peripheral nervous system (PNS)

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 Somatic Nervous System, or voluntary nervous system, handles the voluntary skeletal muscle movement.

The Autonomic Nervous System 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

Evolutionarily, the brain was built from the bottom up. Directly on top of our spine sits the brain stem – sometimes called the reptile brain – with the limbic system (associated with mammals) on top of that, and finally, on top and around that sits 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 (much 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. Its function is mostly concerned with outside world – how things and people work, how to accomplish goals and manage time, etc.
- 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.

- 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.⁸

AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM (ANS)

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

⁸ “Somatic” as used here has a specific biological meaning and is not a byword for embodiment, which is how it is sometimes used.

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.

A common misunderstanding

There's a common misunderstanding that the sympathetic is only fight-flight, but this 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, like when we get excited about something.

Parasympathetic Nervous System (and its Polyvagal nerve)

This system takes care of the 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 Theory⁹ makes a distinction between two branches of the vagus and proposes that each branch supports different

⁹ The Polyvagal Theory was developed by Dr. Stephen Porges

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.

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 directly consciously controlled. 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 centring”.

Another misunderstanding

Saying that the SNS is active and the PSNS is passive is wrong. They are both motor nerves, creating activity somewhere. When parasympathetic triggers a response somewhere, it is increasing activity – for instance, in 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. This comes from agonist-antagonist thinking that is not useful here.

For example, in our eye. both constriction and dilation are done using active muscles, but the effects are opposite. So, it's not that we get dilation just from not constricting.

The heart is an example of how interwoven these feedback loops are: the sympathetic speeds up the heart, and the parasympathetic (vagus nerve) slows it down. The absence of parasympathetic input will increase heart rate without sympathetic. If you then add sympathetic input to it, the heart rate goes up further. Also, at the tissue level there is independent regulation and rhythm that is influenced from outside by sympathetic and parasympathetic.

SOMATIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

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, and 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-fawn response, hyperarousal, 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, along with 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 centring.

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. An example is stage fright and forgetting your point when the CEO suddenly turns his attention on you. 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, and heart rate and breathing slows dramatically.

Another misunderstanding

Be 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, breathes in and holds (sometimes high shallow breathing continues), and there’s a temporary absence of thoughts (e.g. blacking out during a presentation). I explain this primary

“freeze” as a combination of fight-flight at the same time, which means it is part of the second level of safety system and 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 a rough correlations of difference (e.g. a fight or flight preference) with personality type, though it can be 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, which are likely learned when growing up to cover up more “primitive” fight or flight responses.

In my experience, people can have a response which comes across as needy, submissive, placating or overly concerned with

managing appearances. We could call this a “fake” or “fawn” response. [People-pleasing](#) is an example of this.¹⁰

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).

CENTRING TO GET OUT OF FIGHT-FLIGHT

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 practices can help to raise the threshold of the amygdala hijack, thereby increasing the chances of functioning optimally more of the time. See the later section on baselines for more on this.

Because the higher brain functions are often temporarily powerless, our best chance for learning to recover is training to use centring practices. This involves shifting our state in the body, which influences brain function. When we're triggered or reactive (fight-flight response activated), we can use any of the hyper-arousal centring techniques presented in this book.

Influence of facial expression and posture on our state

Not only do our feelings and thoughts influence our facial expressions, but it also works the other way round. A famously researched example is holding a pencil horizontally between your

¹⁰ You may like the People Un-Pleasing book if you notice this pattern in yourself: <https://embodimentunlimited.com/peopleunpleasing-book>

teeth so you are forced to “smile”, which actually makes you happier (see Laird).

Expansive postures, where you use extensor muscles instead of flexor muscles, generally make us feel more confident, powerful and uplifted (see 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 bodymind 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 centring?

There are many different centring techniques that we will outline below. Some work better for some people or for some situations and interactions.

I'll make a few general connections to the centring 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 centring involves straightening and lengthening the body, thereby engaging the extensors. It also includes relaxing, softening of muscle tissue on the outside of the 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.

Centring 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 “bidirectional” body-mind link outlined.

“Social centring” involves such things as thinking of a loved one, looking at friendly faces nearby, or imagining a source of inspiration. This often helps us to relax 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.

SOURCES & 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 (accessed 30 March 2016)

[Fight or Flight](#), [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.

The image on the following page, designed by jvnkfood, shows the **biological aspect of the stress response**:

The Fight or Flight Response



Threat: an attack, harmful event, or threat to survival



Brain: the brain processes the signals- beginning in the amygdala, and then the hypothalamus



ACTH: pituitary gland secretes adrenocorticotropic hormone



Cortisol released



Adrenaline released

Physical Effects



Heart rate increase



Bladder relaxation



Tunnel vision



Shaking



Dilated pupils



Flushed face



Dry mouth



Slowed digestion



Hearing loss

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 for relaxation (like doing a yoga class or going for an hour-long walk in the park), but tools that can be used quickly whilst in the midst of a challenge. This is what makes them practical.

Following is my collection of centring tools, drawn from many practices 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 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 place more emphasis on our social relationships (interpersonal aspects), and those that facilitate deeper connection to the world around us (in particular, nature – the impact of the natural world is critical and deserving of its own term).

Centring techniques can therefore be thought of as consisting of four 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:

Self-regulation

- Down-regulation centring methods
- Up-regulation centring methods
- Dual centring methods
- True individually-adapted centring

Co-regulation

- Interpersonal centring
- Social centring

Eco-regulation

- Blue spaces
- Green spaces

- Nature more generally

Theo-regulation

- Meaning or “spirit” centring
- Depth intrapersonal centring

Following you’ll find techniques from each of these approaches, although as mentioned, they can be combined (for example, breathing together in a group in nature, focused on a common goal)...

SELF-REGULATION

Relaxation Centring

These can be thought of as antidotes to hyper-arousal – they’re 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 hyperarousal overstimulation from the sympathetic nervous system. Try them and see what works for you.

Note that relaxing can bring back access to emotions that excess tension “hides” so go slowly with them if you have a stressful life or past trauma. Go easy by trying a technique or two a few times a day until you're established with them.



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

Out-breath 🌟

Focus your attention on and slightly lengthen the out-breath. Simple. This is a yoga classic and now scientifically established as a stress reducer through research. 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". It's a great technique, although it requires some practice before you use it, so it isn't always the best one to teach body-mind beginners.

Concave spine ✨

Shaping the spine to a slightly concave (flexed) C-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 spider'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 our breathing and spine, both of which are critical. I tend to start at the top and work down. It can help to tense the following areas 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, your jaw be soft, and your lips just closed or slightly open. Say “ahhh” internally or out loud, as if you were lying back in a nice hot bath and relax your throat whilst doing so.
- **Chest:** Let the muscles 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 the “smiling heart technique” below).
- **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 breathe in.¹¹

- **Lower abdominals:** Relax right down to your genitals! The pelvic floor muscles, which 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. 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, letting it support you by undoing any clenching in the toes and soles.

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.

If I only have 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.

¹¹ 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. This means they are likely to be in a mild but constant state of anxiety / aggression, which is 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, which one might guess due to media influence, though I increasingly see this in both men and women.

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 your toes if you need to do this). Getting interested in the areas of contact also helps, e.g. “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 in "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 (whether you're standing or sitting), e.g. tense shoulder muscles.
- Use supportive visualisations. For example, imagine Star Wars type “energy” going down your body through your legs and into 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 and helping everything to 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 someone you care about stroking you also 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 the left and right foot, and the balls and heels of the feet.
- When sitting, find your “sit” (sitz) bones with your attention and ensure that 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 (three inches) below your navel in the centre of your body, will make you more centred 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. However, these techniques are not always socially acceptable to employ in public, so only just qualify as "centring" (since centring must be practical).

Releasing the hands and feet

Many people find that they make fists of having "clutching" claw-like hands and feet when they are stressed. This becomes near-permanent in some elderly or traumatised people.

- 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. This is because they may have been doing it for so long that they have gotten used to it and it is under unconscious control, with tension acting as a natural anaesthetic on top of this.

One way around this is to actually tense more, which brings feeling back, along with some awareness of the muscular groups being used to habitually 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 technique, and there are audio recordings of people talking you through it available online. It can also make an appearance in NSDR and yoga nidra protocols. Whilst it's not good in the middle of life stress, it can be useful after work or to help you sleep.

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. For example, 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 (and other "bottom-up" techniques)

Many tensions in the body-mind can be quickly eliminated through a very natural (and potentially delicious) "squirm and settle".

Simply 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”. On a more subtle level, however, the feeling of ease is what you’re looking for in many techniques – for example, an 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. This is best when combined with postural adjustment. Immersing the face in cold water for a few seconds is a good emergency technique that stimulates what is known as the “dive reflex”, which actually 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. It’s that 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" – we touched upon it earlier in the section on external centring.

- 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.

You can also “open” your hearing by listening all around in an expanding sphere of awareness, noticing 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.

Visualisations

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

- 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, where the wind was gently pushing my ear and cheek, and so involved all my 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 firework and 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. Imagining your whole body coated in a colour, for example, or that you're breathing that colour 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, since 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. What can be more relaxing is focusing on all the space around us. This is also inspired by Wendy Palmer Sensei, and 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 (which are over 99.9% empty 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 can seem quite loud).

Stephen Porges’ research on the vagus nerve points to the involvement of the ear with relaxation.

Sound centring – sigh, om & ahh

Making certain noises helps us relax. There are esoteric schools which have made an art of this, along with various spiritual and religious traditions using sound that exist from every major faith, from Gregorian chanting 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 for many, any humming will do.
- Notice what sounds you associate with relaxation and make when you relax. Repeat these when needed.
- 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, “soften” them so that they are not locked. Sometimes it’s easier to lock them first. This is obviously a standing-only technique.

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, note how you use language.

Eyes open or closed?

Most kinaesthetic and auditory centring techniques are easier with the eyes closed, which disables the attention-grabbing primacy of the visual sense and enables 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 out 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 any clients you may be leading.

The basic principle here is to make any centring technique easy enough to learn, but then to quickly progress to more realistic conditions.

Exercise – try it!

Try one of the relaxation centring techniques when you're a little stressed (although it's great to practise before you are, too).

“Wake-up” Centring

These can be thought of as antidotes to hypo-arousal – they’re up-regulation techniques to reduce “freeze-fold-fawn”.

There are slightly less techniques available to increase arousal and undo the hypo- distress response. This is both because it is less well understood, and also 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 as a result of blocking out the “loudness” of the over-stimulating modern world and trying not to feel unpleasant emotions, too.

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 that 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. 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 a general sense of “being there”, solid and real.

You can use weight training, gym equipment, walls and other objects for this, but since this is sometimes not practical, 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 push and then pull, activating the chest and triceps muscles and then 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 “urggghh”, as if you were a caveman pushing a heavy car.

“Ujii” breath or 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. Search how to do this on YouTube, as it’s easy to find.

While it may seem unusual, growling quietly can also be stimulating.

Both of these techniques may be embarrassing to do publicly and they take 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 release 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 – 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 to compare parts and sides of the body, try to spot the ones with less “life”, and then bring more awareness there through attention.

- Scan your 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 imagining the area.

Gentle movement and touch

Doing a gentle body movement routine, such as the one found in our [EFC body awareness form video](#) that’s available for 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. The compare method above along with gentle touch can do the same.

You can use touch while watching 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, whilst

just using 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 can work our weight against gravity and jump up and down! Whilst this is 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 body's natural springiness, mentioned earlier in the chapter, is a good thing to get in touch with if you want to counter general hypo-arousal. Doing a little jump, bending the knees and feeling the bounce back, or having a friend push down on your shoulders from above, all do the same and also work well.

Ear massage and face stretch

Massaging the ears with the fingers and stretching out the facial muscles by making all sorts of silly expressions – yawning like a lion and sticking your tongue out – is a fun way to become present again.

You can also 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 they're 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 / index finger, 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. It’s better to spend time developing more subtle anti-hypo-arousal skills, too.

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 imagine feeling a cool breeze wafting across your whole body, leaving you refreshed.
- Another classic is to imagine that 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 – this can often be 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 do this will also engage these muscles and make you feel stronger.

Alternatively, imagine swallowing a bowling ball – this can have a similar effect (courtesy of Paul Linden).

Exercise – try it!

Try one of the wake-up centring techniques when you're tired.

Dual Centring Techniques

These can help to 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 hav-



ing 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 of movement patterns, or imagining like in that moment. There are back foot and moving the arms moving from the belly or emotion, moving the hips moving feeling the top of the head and foot to add lightness, feeling add stability, we could go 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 Elements 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 or grasping

responses 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 (raise my head to a neutral position, relax my belly and shoulders, and expand my attention).

Hopefully the large number of options presented above will give you a sense of some of the principles involved, along with allowing 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, like when two friends are arguing. In fact, your own state and consequential

body language and tone of voice are more important than what you say. 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 (co-regulation, see below) and using centring for conflict resolution.

CO-REGULATION

Interpersonal centring or “social centring” is a way of engaging the natural co-regulatory tendency of people, making use of the social engagement system to reduce fight-flight-freeze fold. Co-regulation is interpersonal, using relationship to regulate, rather than the intrapersonal self-regulation techniques.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, we are social animals and regulate ourselves primarily through social connection. This is actually very obvious. 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, rather than 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 technique), though others use small bits of this approach, and as mentioned, it's central to many systems, which consider it within a longer timeframe or as the basis for effective learning (we learn best in safe and supportive relationships). This approach is congruent with Stephen Porges' model of stress and the myelinated vagus nerve being the primary parasympathetic system.



However, as with pleasure centring, making use of this interpersonal soothing in centring has largely been ignored. Instead, it's either considered a long-term stress reduction strategy, or it's 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 when 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, by definition, techniques are needed rapidly under pressure.

There are, however, methods such as shifting our attention to where there is nourishing social connection in the present moment. There is often some, but if not, it could be accessed within a person's extended social context or through past memories. I developed this notion while on an extended tour in many countries for work, where I was removed from my social support network. Frankly, I was a bit stressed and lonely for a considerable period of time, sitting on plane-after-place next to people I didn't know. That's when it occurred to me that these people were 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 theo-regulation, helping people develop a "higher power" to help them regulate.

Some social centring techniques

Following 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 feel free to create your own, too.

ABC – Acceptance, Belonging, Care

This is the first of two alphabetically-styled techniques, and focuses on relationship, reducing FFFF with the social engagement system.



There are three steps. Look for:

- A. How you are **accepted** / safe, or at least not actively rejected.
- B. How you **belong** with who you are with (or what you have in common with people).
- C. 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 a facilitator or when doing a talk), or even on a less friendly person but focusing on the positive in the relationship. Even 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, or 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. We can 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 particularly useful if you're in a hypo-arousal response). 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 to 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 for over fifteen years is smiling heart. It's quite simple – Paul's instruction is to "think of someone who makes your heart smile".¹²

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 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 then replicate it under pressing circumstances.

Exercise – smiling heart

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

This one has to be used with common sense and cultural sensitivity. In many instances, it's possible to smile and make

¹² Wendy Palmer likewise uses the simple and accessible, "think of someone who makes you smile". Note that this is not "think of someone you love" or similar, as we can love people we actually have quite unhelpful responses to.

brief eye-contact with strangers, who will normally smile back if you're not overdoing it or doing it in a grossly inappropriate environment. If this happens, feel the positive influence of social connection.

Practical examples of social centring...

Example 1: 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.

Example 2: 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 (self-regulation), remind myself what matters is the relationship (theo-regulation – more on that later), that my partner loves me and that we have this in common (which is a combination of B from ABC social centring and L from SPIRAL). This example is more unstructured than the forms we have presented here, and is typical of people who have been centring for many years and tend not to do things so "by the book" anymore.

ECO-REGULATION

All of the centring techniques I introduce should be understood within someone's environmental context. We have evolved to be more relaxed around "green" and "blue", which are terms eco-psychologists use for plants and water. Nature has a huge

impact on people’s mental health, wellbeing and, critically for this book, stress.

When you’re outside, you may enjoy the natural up- and down-regulation of the wind on your skin, or the sound of birdsong. This is not centring, but it sure is helpful and worth considering!

There are a number of potential mechanisms for the regulating impact of nature from evolutionary “programming”, to sensorial richness (variations in temperature, light, etc., that make it easier to feel one’s body), to just not being on our devices! I would point people to *Nature Fix* by Florence Williams for more on this. What is clear, however, is the measurable physiological impacts of nature, such as on blood pressure.

More broadly than the natural world, we are influenced by the degree of order and beauty of the spaces we live in. There is a reason why Zen Temples are the way they are, for example. So even if you’re not able to be in nature, it’s worth considering the effect of “your ecology”. How can you design it, or alter it, to support regulation?

THEO-REGULATION

Earlier we discussed self-regulation centring techniques in terms of a simple up- and down-regulation (for hypo- and hyper-arousal), along with 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” oneself in an extended sense of the word, using the “why” and “who” aspects of our being. Whilst this can technically be seen as regulating oneself, using depth centring or meaning¹³ to regulate can also be considered within the context of connecting to something “bigger” than oneself. That’s why I’m including this after co-regulation and eco-regulation, which is connecting socially or environmentally.

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

While this may seem somewhat esoteric for now, 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 self-regulation techniques, while others find them less accessible. You don’t need to provide a definite answer to the questions. In

¹³ Credit to Richard Strozzi-Heckler who is, to my knowledge, the person who developed meaning-based centring in this manner in the modern context.

fact, trying to do so may make you stressed. It's the asking of 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 ____

Etcetera...

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

Theo-regulation 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, but doesn't have to be. The critical thing in all of these theo-regulation methods is to reconnect with value and purpose.

Basic Enquiry Centring

Enquiries can also be used as part of self-regulation, Wendy Palmer¹⁴, 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.

¹⁴ Credit also to Wendy Palmer, who I believe was the first to start using enquiry centring.

The Principles of Centring

So far we have introduced centring techniques in their purest forms – it can be wise to practise them this way when beginning so as to not confuse them. In reality, however, we often teach and practise 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 our [Certification of Embodiment Coaching](#) (CEC) and shorter business courses is [ABC Centring](#):

- A. Aware:** Feel your body here and now
- B. Balanced:** Balance your posture, expansive awareness and intentional reaching
- C. Core:** Relax your eyes, jaw, belly, pelvic floor

D and **E** can be added for more hypo-responses: **Definitely** and **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 centring techniques from around the world. It is best done after practising the gold star techniques individually as it incorporates them.

ABC takes about 3 minutes when done in full and can be used in 3-5 seconds after some practice. It can be done standing, sitting or in any other posture, although upright is preferable. Yes, I

totally cheated with the letters to cram in all the good stuff, but even if you just do a bit of it, that's okay – it will still work as long as you do some awareness, relaxing (anti-hyper) and gently stimulating (anti-hypo) parts. ABCDE could also stand for:

A – Aware and **A**ccepting

B – **B**alanced, **B**oundaried, **B**reathed

C – **C**ore relaxed, **C**onected to **C**are and meaning, **C**reative imagery

D – **D**efinitely here, **D**efinitely relaxed, **D**efiantly shiny

E – **E**legantly **E**ffortlessly **E**nergised with **E**ase

- **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 or the surface supporting you, and your breath. Scan up and down the body with your attention, remembering 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 imagine floating up from the back of the head, keeping you alert. Balance both sides, making 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 breath into the belly and lengthen the out-breath to relax, or

lengthen the in-breath into the chest to enliven, as appropriate.

- **Core relaxed** – Relax your eyes, mouth, tongue, jaw, shoulders, stomach and back muscles, and breathe deeply with your diaphragm so that your belly and lower back move out slightly as you breathe in. You can tighten your abdominal muscles before you relax them if that helps. Focus on your physical centre of gravity, a point a few inches below the navel inside of you. Relax the pelvic floor and let the feet “sink”. 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?), along with the 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 while saying “calm”.
- **Definitely here, definitely relaxed, Defiantly shiny** – these three are checking you have done the boundaries, reaching-out and centre-line relaxation parts, ensuring a hyper- and hypo-balance.
- The result of all this is that you may well feel **Elegantly, 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 okay. It’s centring overkill, as mentioned!

You can also memorise the following paragraph, write it on a piece of paper to keep in your wallet, or make a note on your phone:

*I am **aware** of my body and **accept** what I find. I **balance** my structure, attention and intention out in all directions. I feel and reinforce my **boundaries**. I don't forget to **breathe!** I relax my **core** – tongue, tummy and whole **centre-line**. I **connect** to what I **care** about and the people that support me, and also to a **clear creative** image and word that helps. I check I'm that I'm **definitely** here, **definitely** relaxed and shine **defiantly**. I find ways to feel **elegantly** awesome, **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, including other techniques you may know and things that are important to you. You may like to come up with an acronym you like, etc.



This is something we do on [CEC](#), as we find that it's easier for people to remember techniques that they have creatively come up with themselves, and they're more committed to using them. Do

not be a slave to someone else's form, especially if you are not a beginner in this work.

HOW TO PRACTISE CENTRING – 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, along with the kind of things they say. Make the experience detailed and sensorially rich. Notice what you do in your body. Be specific.

How to calibrate practice

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 standalone tools, but practising 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 versus 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 the centring approach if it's not successful.
7. If the reaction reduced successfully and the FFFF or eustress response was fully inhibited, increase the stressor strength gradually until a FFFF occurs again and repeat from step 3.

In this way your skill in centring will continue to grow. A well design martial arts or yoga class can be used to practise this, or use of the stress progression programme outlined below. Permission should be used for each stage, with a step-up in stimulus strength when you're coaching others through this (more on this later). A fuller version of this algorithm – another gem from Paul Linden – is at the end of this chapter.

Note that there are two parts to this process: awareness and choice. As ever, these are the heart of embodied work – noticing the reaction, and then change it. Just practising the first part – noticing our reaction to stress – is useful, 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

When learning to centre or teaching it to others, it's important to use an intelligent and kind intensity progression. By this I mean that you start below the stress / eustress response threshold, then gradually progress (with renewed consent at 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, a greater level of stress is needed, due to both habituation and increased centring skill, which is the whole 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 that it is their choice to escalate and not mine, so that they keep control:

1. Tissue throwing at belly¹⁵
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)

¹⁵ This is a very safe place to start, as few people have been traumatised by a Kleenex! If you're American, “tissue” is British English for “Kleenex”.

9. Shoulder grab from behind with shout (no pull or push)

After this, you may add various extreme measures that are suitable for martial artists and military personnel that are best not to indulge here. Do note that these are to stimulate a distress reaction – below you'll find suggestions for the eustress reaction.

I'll outline some details on using these stressors below. Verbal triggers, like harsh words, can also be calibrated by altering their tone, volume and the distance they're said from. There'll also be more on this shortly.

In the case of someone I have reason to believe is very sensitive, like a trauma survivor, I might not even start with a full level one tissue throw. That could be stopping when I raise my arm to throw if doing so has caused a stress reaction. In his work with abuse survivors, Paul Linden 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 in most cases, however, and I have found it's more than cautious enough to do work with general populations. Starting with shouts and grabs, however, is not safe, given how many people may have been involved with real violence, making these triggers. Shouts and grabs could eventually be tackled by a trauma survivor, but this would take some working up to, and best in a one-to-one setting with a trained trauma therapist.

If you're facilitating centring, you likely won't know if someone you're working with has been traumatised, and since rates of sexual abuse alone are as high as they are, it's best to start with tissues or some other safe and gentle initial stressor.

Example – the centring principle in use

Albert (name changed) is a client who has been referred to me by his company's HR department. He attends a day-long stress management workshop along with all the other senior managers at the fast-paced technology company he works for. Albert 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. Whilst he's sceptical at first, he sees that just by relaxing his belly and mouth, there's 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).

Following the workshop, Albert does a follow-up lunchtime coaching session with me, where he shares his concerns about his CEO's views on his anger, his current level of stress-related drinking, and his 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. We also agree on some daily practices for him, which he does each time his phone rings and when reminders go off on his phone.

People start noticing a difference at work and at 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 practise centring techniques.

Stressor 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 so be used for centring practice (as mentioned earlier in this chapter).

I use this a lot in coaching and as an alternative to throwing tissues at people. I have also noted during meditation and throughout my day that I throw myself off-centre quite often doing this (thinking of unpleasant things)!

With increasing awareness, you can catch this quicker and get back on-balance, which is the important thing. You won't ever be 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 on a scale out of 10."

Tissue throwing

As mentioned above, this is the most gentle physical way of stimulating the distress response that I know of. Simply throw a tissue (in the US, a Kleenex) at someone. This is a very safe place to start, as very few people have been hurt by tissues!

1. Have someone throw a tissue at you – first the body and then the face if this creates no response.
2. Observe what specifically you do in your body (e.g. twisting away, tensing the abdominals, etc.).
3. 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 it's too close), and add a yelp to increase the strength of the stimuli when ready (see the algorithm and note on calibration).

As an aside, tissue throwing even works during live video coaching (e.g. on Zoom), 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 (neocortical), but just responds to innate and conditioned stimuli we know can't hurt us, yet we may still flinch.

Proximity and walking at people

Walking slowly towards someone is a stress progression (for both people) – unless we are very intimate with that person, we will feel like they are encroaching on our personal space. It's important to do this slowly, and either partner may use a prearranged 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. A more advanced version is to add requests or criticism to this, or multiple walkers to create 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 the first sudden shock (as with tissues), but also sustaining ongoing pressure. It is adapted from the martial art of aikido, as are many 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.
- 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 grabs¹⁶

I first saw the two-hands on one wrist grab variation used with centring from Richard Strozzi-Heckler (again, adapted from aikido). It 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,

¹⁶ Be careful of watches and jewellery with grabs, though tearing these off by mistake will certainly provide a stimulus to work with! There can also be traumatic associations with such a grab, so use with care.

whilst doing it from behind and adding a shout adds more intensity.

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 people, 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, which is a key aspect of any centring.

The more advanced version is an ice bath.

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-typical chair pose, leaning with your back to a wall with bent knees and feet 50cm away.
- Sitting upright on the toes.
- Warrior pose with the arms down.



All of 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 also be used, but they lack this benefit.

Exercises to 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. 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 a description of a complete pattern. For example, say "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 discovering that 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, whilst anything that makes a loud noise (e.g. an air-horn) is ideal once you have established the basics.

Throwing soft balls or 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've also had 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. We once walked out barefoot into the snow in Lithuania, calibrating with the depth of snow. That was fun.

Some people require lateral thinking; my friend Mairtin, for example, is a very “cool customer”. He’s an Irish kung fu teacher, and after taking my trousers off and running at him with a knife to no effect, I found that a withering look his mother used to use was quite effective. This type of thing should be regarded as an advanced technique, however, and is highly context and relationship dependent! Use with great care.

Centring for children

Children can also benefit from centring. We’ve helped children overcome exam stress, stand up to bullies, feel happier and provide a good example when parents are arguing.

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, use a stuffed toy animal that roars (your voice), or other similar things 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). Safety issues of consent and calibration apply equally, 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 than men in most cultures. 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 that 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. That's why using it's important to understand centring principles, as you can adapt rather than be stuck with a technique. When I work with orthodox Jewish or some Muslim populations, for example, we cannot use centring techniques that involve touch. However, 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, like the veteran soldiers I recently worked with in Ukraine – many of whom had



been captured and seen many friends die – or the domestic violence groups a student of mine 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, whilst the latter may feel like 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 that grabs from behind can feel like things you don't see coming in life. It is also possible to grab in a sleazy, begging, dismissive or wormy way, and these are actually 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 mainly on physical stimuli, which 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, ask people to imagine a nice juicy steaming cow-pat full of maggots in your hand, and then you 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 or re-centre easily. Their tone and expression is important.

Start with something neutral – the Paul Linden's classic is "You have too many noises!", which 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 said to 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 that you can 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 as "whiney" or "sleazy" tones.

Compliments

Interestingly, for many people compliments are triggering. These 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. 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, when they say “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

1. Identify an area to be examined – listening to people's exact words helps.
2. Create an embodied metaphor for circumstances, e.g. being pulled in two directions.
3. Observe embodied reactions and possibilities.
4. Gain insights into the external circumstance (e.g. current patterns or new possibilities).
5. Apply any insights back to the external situation.
6. Review and adjust.

This is 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 relationships, or aikido as a model for conflict, we are working within this frame.

Centring games for kids of all ages

Any game or activity that involves a little pressure can be used to practise centring. Competitive games are good, such as thumb wars, trying to pull each other over a line, or causing each other to move a foot by “pushing” 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, e.g. tennis, Jenga, walking on a balance beam, playing a challenging computer game, etc., but with the express intention of practising centring rather than 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, although 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, including everything from chocolate, to babies, to naked bodies, to money, to a WiFi signal! We ask people to make a scale of these themselves, then turn towards and away from them to work with the grasping responses and see the reaction. This allows them to see their responses to seeing them and then not seeing them as they turn around. Another simple technique is to ask people to turn to something in the room they like then to turn back again.

When practising [Embodied Toolkit](#), I ask people to enter postures they enjoy, and then ask them to stop doing them repeatedly. But for a simpler version of this that a colleague of mine came up with: have people lie on their backs and then raise their heads an inch or two. Then let them 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!

During workshops, I also find people get attached to their partners and talking in debriefing, so I use the ending of 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 – notice a habitual reaction and then, using centring, 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 "seven" 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 and 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. Ideally, you should 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, it's best to avoid assumptions or comparisons – people do not always react how you might imagine!

What also 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 them to someone else if you're a coach untrained in trauma work, for example.

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

1. 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.

2. 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.
3. Learn / teach an appropriate centring technique using culturally-sensitive language and by adding metaphors, role-models and images if helpful.
4. Repeat stimulus and employ the centring technique, targeting specifics of the individual distress response.
5. Notice objective reduction in distress response, subjective feelings of distress and effect on the relationship (e.g. less hostile). A note here: a coach should let a client discover this for themselves not tell them. If there is no reduction of reaction, alter the centring technique until you find a more effective one.
6. When reactivity is eliminated, increase the stimulus strength (with permission again if coaching another).
7. Repeat centring and continue.

This is what we do when we practise centring. Like all of the other principles, there are many ways of applying it, including different stimuli like tissues, grabs and insults, as well as many centring techniques. This also contains sub-principles such as capable consent, calibration and individual adaptation. A well-designed yoga or martial arts class can be an expression of this.

Empowerment and consent

The person doing a centring technique must be fully in charge for it to be empowering. The receiver of the stressor is the boss of the exercise. They must give full consent at every step of the way (e.g. if you want to increase the level of stressor).

If you're 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?" to make sure that they know it's themselves when doing a centring exercise with them. I also get them to practise 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 [CEC](#) 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 feel that they can't say no, so we give explicit normalised chances to say no, such as "It's really okay if you don't want to, lots of people do and I can get another volunteer without a problem".

We also observe that the "body is saying yes" too before accepting a verbal yes (erring on the side of safety), meaning that someone is not visibly going into a FFFF response when asked! With more yin / water types, along with 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.

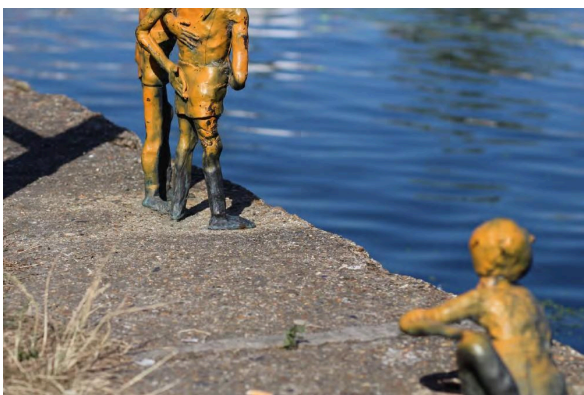
Individual Adaptation and Cultural Models

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 have differences in response to different stimuli. While the general eustress and distress responses are biological and therefore undoing these through centring is universal too, there are also cultural factors at work.

For example, some cultures have lower baseline stress than others, some are more hypo- and some are more hyper-aroused, and different aspects of FFFF are more expressed as they’re considered more acceptable.

Personal and culturally-significant inspirations can also be used, like role-models which act as archetypes to aid with the process. For example, I might imagine the steadiness of Churchill or the upright dignity of my deceased aikido instructor William Smith Shihan, but this (particularly the latter) might not work for others with different backgrounds.

Language and imagery also needs to be matched. For example, "Let your belly fall out" may be an accurate instruction, but for many people who are conditioned by Western media (particularly



women), this classic from Paul Linden may not work so well! A

related example might be to ask someone to relax their belly "like a kitten" or "like a predatory animal", which will depend a lot on their personality.

People's belief systems also need to be taken into account, as 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 in this case). As ever, use what works for you and your clients by experimenting and paying attention to the 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" or "my stomach muscles are contracted") from mental evaluations and descriptions of emotional gestalt reactions based upon these and 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 do this too if you're coaching them. Ask "where in your body is it?", "how do you do that?" or "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 won't be) and then go from there. You don't need to make someone wrong or argue with them, but just help them to 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 book¹⁷, but when centring, it is often helpful to reframe language around a distressing stimuli, removing what is Neuro-Linguistic Programming and CBT thought distortions or thinking errors. For example, someone may say, “everyone at work hates me” or “she rejected me”. You may like to ask if is this 100% accurate before doing centring work around such a vague stimuli. I might realise, for example, “Okay, 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, which helps people move from "I got stressed", to the more accurate but clunkier-sounding, "I did stress in my body this way...". As a facilitator, this might be 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 enquiry 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!

¹⁷ If interested, you may like some of Paul Linden’s work on this [here](#)

The use of operational language is vital for leading effective centring. This means describing a clear method, and not just giving people a desired result or metaphor. For example, "focus your attention on the sensation of breathing" instead of "empty your mind" or "extend your 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 to realise that you're off-centre before you kick the cat, scream at your partner or get fired for insulting your boss.

With training, people can recognise before those around them do, which is a reversal of the typical situation! Look out for specific identifiable "markers" when practising centring. You may need to slow down and use gentler stimuli to do this, or go in and out of an uncentred state repeatedly (see the 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 – which I highly recommend – 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 do I mean by this? Well, 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 that 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 your 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 so it will be harder to do elsewhere. For example, the first times I forgot to wear my aikido clothes to class or did aikido outdoors, there was a big drop in my ability to centre. I learnt from these situations that it is necessary to centre in different environments and at different times to get the full situational transfer which truly embeds the skill at a general level.

One anchoring technique I like is the “ruler-hoop” exercise. For this, 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” for when you need these states, say for a job interview, presentation or difficult conversation with a partner. Then you can 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 within 20 minutes), 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!

However, another answer 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, and 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, as then you are not responsible. There may also be identity level issues (for example, “I’m a city trader not a monk! I should be stressed!” or “I’m a passionate person!”). These deeper factors 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.

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 from being in a state of either hyper- 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 then become linked. So, for example, I have a critical colleague that often uses a particular phrase. With practice, this can 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 of 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, and the more you do them, the better you get. Like a sports person practising before the Olympics, it’s best to practise centring when you don’t need it most!

For example, you may like to develop a daily centring routine as you turn on your computer, when you make a tea, or when you’re 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 the 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 above). You'll find further resources on this at the end.

Under pressure we revert to what we have practised, so we need to practise when it's easy, so centring is available when life's hard (this is 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). So, 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 practise! 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 or phone. Involve a friend. Etcetera.

Emergency stabilisation techniques and trauma

While embodied practices generally and centring in particular are very safe when done within the guidelines, it's still possible for you or a client to suddenly feel 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 (called "jumping jacks" in the US) are two simple techniques that will immediately give a sense of empowerment, as will stamping and other strong movements and corresponding sounds.

Embodiment trainer Francis Briers used to teach a small haka-like set of moves that involved stamping, slapping and the sound "Huhh!" to our students before we let them work with others, which worked very well. Paul Linden favours a technique of imagining swallowing a well-battered 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 sensations in the present moment, like asking, "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. Knowing one or two of these emergency techniques, especially if you are going to start working with the body with others, is particularly helpful.

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 is 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. During [CEC](#) we encourage the group of participants who are from all over the world to take a few breaths together, often to start sessions, to “get in sync”.

Groups often coordinate movements unconsciously, like friends getting “in-step” while walking together. During workshops, when we ask groups to walk around a room, within a very short space of time they will all be walking in the same direction, also in step, and



be more relaxed. Aligning nervous systems not only brings people closer together but also 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 in theo-regulation. 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 theo-regulation, of form of meaning centring in groups with some simple coordinated breath, ritual and movement.

Testing centring and the scientific paradigm shift

So far 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, which is particularly important for more sceptical groups, like those we work with in the corporate world.

Essentially, this method is compatible with a modern worldview. We find that asking people to believe what we say as subject matter experts is one thing, but helping them see the impact for themselves creates a whole 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, then re-apply the stimulus), or that it’s not just concentration (remove centring, give another task, e.g. wiggling fingers, then re-apply the stimulus). There are many more examples, but more generally, what we want to encourage is to move beyond blind faith and convincing people and into a place of 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 a 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 a postmodern mistrust of science, which has lost much authority after the scientific horrors of the 20th century, and is present in the many “alternative” subcultures 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” 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. Paul Linden has some quite remarkable videos on this, and there’s also “ki-testing” in aikido, although 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), so we expect to see a lot of development in centring as a result of these in the near future. Essentially, they make objective testing of techniques 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. What is out there refers only to hyper-arousal distress-reducing relaxation techniques. Much of what we have discussed here in regards to hypo-arousal, eustress, meaning-based and social centring is innovative and unheard of by most centring practitioners worldwide as of now. 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, along with those just keen to pass this stuff on. With that in mind, I'd like to highlight the importance of two things:

1. Having a long-term personal centring practice if you are going to teach it successfully and with integrity.
2. Knowing the safety precautions contained in the principles we have outlined, particularly with regards to consent, capacity and calibration. Take these really seriously if you don't want to damage people.

A facilitator, whether they are 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 he could never do centring with clients, as it would be too strange for them (I'd suggest that this isn't true if it was presented right, but that's beside this point), but that he had gotten great benefit from the practice nonetheless, 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 but was 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 presentations in front of large groups or important clients
- Ethical dilemmas
- Receiving and giving feedback

This is just a selection of situations, but there are, of course, also many more.

Reflection – why centre?

Now that you have read nearly quite a bit on the subject and hopefully practised a number of exercises, where as a facilitator may centring be useful?

How to introduce centring

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

- Be confident (practising it yourself and seeing the benefits helps!)
- Don't make it a big deal – if you present it as weird, it will be.
- Connect it to what they already know, e.g. sports, yoga, whatever
- Link it to what motivates them and how it will help them
- Share your own experience authentically
- Mention relevant science / neuroscience if the client is this way inclined, and you know what you're talking about (alternatively, hippie connections if that's their thing, or the martial arts connection if they're a more macho or sporting type)
- Have them try it and prove it for themselves (“don't believe me”)

If you're from a more “alternative” background, like yoga or meditation, [this video](#) may help with what language to avoid.

Experiment

Record yourself introducing centring and note how you can improve it. Practice with a “straight” friend (or get someone to pretend they’re your conservative uncle) and get feedback on any words you used that made them shudder!

Main applications in courses

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

- Anger management
- Communication skills
- Conflict management
- Leadership
- Managing difficult behaviour
- Presentation skills
- Resilience
- Risk evaluation
- Stress management
- Time management
- Team building

There’s also likely plenty more that I can’t remember now, too!

Centring helps with so many things that you could use it as part of almost any course. I certainly wouldn’t dream of teaching leadership or a stress management course without it.

Often, it has been assessed by very senior people (e.g. in companies like Unilever, Ikea, Axa, Shell, L’oreal, Virgin Atlantic, Oxfam, Save The Children, Google and more) as the most useful thing on courses I’ve ran. Other members of the [CEC](#) community have similar experiences with diverse organisations.

I discuss some applications on [this video](#).

Main applications – coaching 1-to-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”, or when the client is “rambling” or “going in circles”
- When you and the coachee find yourself arguing
- When there’s an important decision to be made
- As part of “homework”

I’ve done plenty of coaching demonstrations using centring, like [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

You may also like [this](#) from Paul Linden.

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!

Check-points if setting as “homework”

If you want coachees to get the full benefits of centring, they need to practise. I hope by now that this is obvious! Here are some things to consider with them:

- How many times per day or 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 by 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. It could also be that the whole of a movement class can be considered a centring exercise. I'd guess that the possibilities are fairly apparent for many movement teachers. 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. Using an 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 being 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? What about 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, which 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 a 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 online.¹⁸

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.

¹⁸ See also Anouk Brack's paper: [Applications of embodiment in organisations: Benefits to leadership, communication and innovation](#)

As ever, do not confuse practice with application. People who wait until they need to apply a skill where it matters to practise it will not perform well. It is best to practise 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 difficult 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 then it's usually worth bringing to therapy, as something is going on. The most challenging people to centre around are often those that you have a lot of history and "shadow" around, which can often be family members. I often joke that, compared to family dinners, the war zones I have been in were an easy centring application! Ram Das similarly says that 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. It's not wise to try and rely upon centring to manage your mood when you've thrown out good sleeping habits 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 that you have a chance to test



this for yourself, relating to what matters 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 that 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. Rather, it's managing oneself more effectively whilst feeling more and being more connected. 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 that this risk is far off for most!

Similarly, for those working in environments that require the adaptive physical part of the distress response – like 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 when it doesn't. People also worry 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, where we'll also explore expression in more detail. For now, let's just say that when we train students on [CEC](#), as well as in our daily work with centring, we also dance and do deep intuitive "feel and allow" practices most days in order to balance. In some ways, centring can be seen as "yang" (even if producing a more yin state), so these "yin" expression 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 being honest, the times that call for a complete loss of regulation are rare and more often that not, we find arguments against self-regulation are 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, and that is itself a form of self-regulation: the centring of letting go!

What's the opposite of stress?

With all this focusing on stress and centring, it's easy to get caught up in the negative. 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 that hardly captures our humanity, and it lacks 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".¹⁹

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, acceptance, intention, relaxation, structural alignment, and the balance, freedom and energy to move. All of the centring techniques presented encourage these fundamentals.

Living 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. What is available at such depth is much more than just no stress or even wellbeing. What is available is our

¹⁹ 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.

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 in various professional and personal areas. Many are part of [our embodiment community](#), but they also work in various different fields all over the world.

An example of centring success with a coachee

Fiona Buckland, Executive Coach – London, UK

<https://www.fionabucklandcoaching.com/>

I find centring 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 difficult 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 centring 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 centring 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 (e.g. 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, etc.).

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.

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

Realising burnout

Curtis Watkins, Author & Coach, 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 centring success with a coachee

Joanne Heeson, Corporate Coach – Geneva, Switzerland

I cannot overemphasise 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.

Centring for Performance

Liz Peters, Improviser and Comedian – Brighton, UK

<https://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

Clare Myatt, Somatic Coach & Psychotherapist – UK

<https://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 satisfaction 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 centring. centring 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 centred. 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 centre, we can come full circle and relearn the magic of centring. 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, centring doesn't bring overnight relief, but it's worth practising until it does. Being centred allows us to draw on our resources, resilience, and experience. Most importantly, being centred 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 practise what is in this 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 email:

- [@warkmalsh on Instagram](#)
- [Mark Walsh on Facebook](#)

- Mark Walsh, May 2024 – Frome, UK

Centring Resources

We have many videos on [The Embodiment Channel](#) on YouTube, showing centring in action with clients, along with detailing much of the theory here. However, we've collected many of these in one place at:

<https://embodimentunlimited.com/learn-centring>

Further training

The self-paced [Deep Resilience](#) course is an extensive dive into all aspects of centring.

This [Centring Masterclass](#) is good for those looking for something shorter.

For those who want to teach centring to others, you'll learn all you need and more on the [Certification of Embodiment Coaching \(CEC\)](#).

Paul Linden has plenty of great eBooks and free articles [here](#).

Recommended books

Paul Linden's [Embodied Peacemaking](#) is excellent (by far the best book on the subject, in fact), whilst his newest book, [It's All The Same \(Except for the Differences\)](#) is also worth a read.

Wendy Palmer, Stuart Heller and Richard Strozzi-Heckler all have books and online resources worth a look too, and Wendy also has a centring app.

Appendices & Resources

Appendix 1

Stress Response Regulation Literature Review

Mairtin McNamara, PhD, Embodiment Teacher, Graduate of the Embodied Facilitator Course 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 improvements 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 behavioural 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 behavioural 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 preoperative 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).

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Appendix 2

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

A controversial note on "energy" – a new-age delusion or key embodied tool?

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 attests 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 others who contributed to this book may see things somewhat differently. That's always been okay, as we're a diverse bunch.

About Mark Walsh

Mark Walsh leads embodiment, coaching and trauma education trainings.

He is the author of *Embodiment, The Body in Coaching and Training, Embodied Meditation, People Un-Pleasing* and *The Embodied Toolkit for Coaches*.

Mark hosts *The Embodiment Podcast* (over 3 million downloads), and led *The Embodiment Conference* (1000 teachers, 500,000 delegates). Seeing a theme yet?

He founded the *Embodied Facilitator Course*, and the *Certification of Embodiment Coaching*. Mark has certified over 2000 embodiment coaches, and taught workshops in over 40 countries.

He gained an honours degree in psychology (despite been an alcoholic at the time), and has taught widely in the corporate world – where he pretended to be a grown up for years – including with blue-chip companies (e.g. Google, Unilever, Shell, Axa, L’Oreal).

Mark has worked in war zones (including founding the Sane Ukraine trauma education charity in Ukraine), and entertained over 50,000 children. He has headlined International Coach Federation events, lived with the circus and in slums, taught celebrities, and kissed a princess.

Mark is an aikido black belt, and also has 28 years of experience in other martial arts, yoga, bodywork, improv comedy, conscious dance and meditation.

Embodiment is his obsession, life's work, and frankly, at this point he couldn't get a job doing anything else. He dances like your dad at a wedding, impresses cats with his stroking, and offends pirates with his swearing.

Mark's now tired of writing in the third person. It's getting weird.