

embodied cognition: what to do

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"Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it.

Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it!"

attrib. Goethe/William Murray

"To reach the other shore with each step of the crossing is the way of true living"

Shunryu Suzuki (Zen mind, beginner's mind)

The sister handouts "*Embodied cognition: posture & feelings*" and "*Embodied cognition: muscle & willpower*" illustrate some of the fascinating emerging research on the powerful ways that body posture, facial expression, and body movement all have knock on effects on feelings, thoughts and behaviours. All these systems are interlinked and the body is a great route into affecting our whole feeling state. Here are some thoughts about how we might work with this body-to-mind connection. Do try out any that you feel might be useful for you, and experiment too – come up with your own personal ideas for making this body-to-mind link helpful.

do it now!

We can respond constructively to this increasing understanding of body-mind connections right now! How we hold our bodies now is affecting how we feel. Our facial expression now affects our thinking. How we move changes how we experience ourselves. How do I want to be at the moment – determined & strong? friendly & interested? happy & appreciative? peaceful & relaxed? We can start right now by allowing our posture, our face, our movement to have these qualities. Emotional states are complex interconnections of feelings, thoughts, images, memories, body states, impulses and behaviours. Altering one aspect of this mix has knock-on effects on all other aspects. Our bodies are a great, easily alterable doorway into this whole interlinked system – and wherever we are, we have our bodies. Wherever we are, we can make choices that affect how we want to feel, think and act.

embodied values:

What do we stand for? What qualities, what values really matter to us? How do we want our friends, our family, our loved ones to think of us? What would we like said about us – the kind of person we have been – when we're remembered at our funeral? The linked "*Respected figures*" handout is one way of looking at this central issue. So too is the "*Funeral speeches*" or the similar "*Eightieth birthday party*" exercise. The "*Best possible self*" writing exercise can also help clarify how we want to be. So too can the "*Life highlights*" review. When we know what we stand for, when we know how we want to walk through this world – how we want to walk the path of our life – this affects all that's important in our lives. Again we can start right now. How do these qualities shine out of our facial expression, how do they show in how we hold and move our bodies? Maybe remember a time when you were being yourself in the ways you most want to be. How was your body state? Can you take an internal photograph of what this feels like? Can you sit, stand, move around the room like this right now? How does it affect your breathing, your eyes, your expression? What words or phrases best encapsulate the qualities/values you really care about? You may find it helpful to link these words with body areas. For many people, qualities like love, compassion & kindness naturally feel linked to the heart/the chest. Maybe qualities like courage, determination & persistence can feel connected to our "guts". The head & eyes have obvious links with vision, direction, clarity, awareness & so on. See if this is helpful for you – using words or phrases that you silently repeat to yourself, linking them possibly with breath & awareness of particular body areas. This can further reinforce posture-to-feeling effects.

[Cont.]

links to behavioural activation, facing fears & the bus driver metaphor:

Research findings on body-mind connections have fairly obvious implications for a whole series of other clinical approaches. Behavioural activation is a backbone treatment for depression. Adding advice on standing & sitting tall/open and on walking briskly/arms swinging makes immediate sense. Similarly approaching fears & phobic challenges with determined posture, facial expression & movement can both be recommended & role played. Appropriate use of pre-decided tensing of a muscle group to aid key willpower challenges is also an obvious therapeutic addition. Links here to using "*Implementation intentions*" make very good sense. The "*Bus driver metaphor*" is widely used and moment-to-moment mindfulness of (probably) open, upright, expansive posture is a welcome addition to advice one can give one's inner bus driver!

remind yourself regularly:

Experiment with reminding yourself many times a day of the personal values you want to nourish, the qualities you want to encourage. What is the associated body posture, facial expression, way of moving? What key words or phrases link with these values? What images or memories? Try putting little stick-on reminder dots around your environment – maybe on your watch strap, mobile phone, wallet, in the kitchen, the bathroom, on your toothbrush handle – be creative. You want to "bump into" these reminder dots many times over the course of your day. You don't have to stop when you see one, but become mindful, let your posture/facial expression/movement "uncrumple" and expand. You don't have to be pushed around by the "bus passenger" voices of past conditioning. You don't have to constrict your body & face with unneeded, unhelpful tensions. Let go. Let free. Maybe remind yourself of open, tall, expansive posture (and associated words/breath) during longer or shorter meditations. It may well be helpful to deliberately carry helpful photographs (for example of loved ones or respected figures) or wear "reminder symbols". Choosing music/songs that encourage the qualities you care about can be helpful. Ideas from Korelbaum's Competitive Memory Training are also worth incorporating.

be mindful, open up, expand:

The research findings detailed in "*Embodied cognition: posture & feelings*" and "*Embodied cognition: muscle & willpower*" (and in subsequently emerging publications) open up a whole, exciting avenue of applications – in therapy, in work environments, in our personal lives – both to combat psychological distress more effectively and also to grow our wellbeing & how we function in the world. I hope you enjoy experimenting with these ideas.
