

# Body Awareness

*Role in observing emotions*

*Sensory experiences to raise your body awareness*

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## **Step 1: Raise your body awareness.**

We hear a lot about raising our body awareness, to be more in tune with our bodies. The concept is taught in yoga, tai chi, qi gong and other mindfulness activities. You have in all likelihood read about it in relation to mental health treatments, “be in tune with your body”.

Body awareness is in fact, an important step in improving our emotion regulation through conscious design. Emotions are a physical reaction, and as such, we feel our emotions in our bodies. By becoming more aware of what we are feeling in our bodies, we are more attuned to create the level of alertness and emotional state that we wish to experience. Body awareness empowers us with control of our physical and emotional bearing to be in our optimal condition for the demands of our environment and situation, to allow us to enjoy life to the fullest.

### **Body Awareness**

Body awareness refers to how alert, perceptive, observant, and connected you are to your body. It relies on the accurate receipt and interpretation of sensory information from all parts of your body, both internal and external.

Body awareness is comprised of two main components, sensitivity and attentiveness, to processes within the body and the physical state of the body.

**Sensitivity** refers to the awareness of the bodily sensations, particularly observant of the:

1. Delicate responses to changes in the internal and external environment of the body, and
2. Different types of sensations.

**Attentiveness** in body awareness is in relation to the level of attention focused on the bodily sensations, sufficient to perceive changes in the bodily functioning.

Tsur et al studied the relationship between body awareness, emotional clarity, and mindfulness. For the study, emotional clarity was described as the clear, conscious awareness of personal, subjective emotions with the ability to accurately identify them and differentiate between the emotions. The study’s results showed **body awareness and emotional clarity to be positively linked**, in the



component of body awareness sensitivity only. The capacity to be receptive to bodily sensations was found to be of significance, exclusive of the degree of attention levelled at the bodily sensations. The sensitivity component of **being receptive to the bodily sensations to enable the identification and differentiation of sensations appears to be the important factor in body awareness for emotional clarity.**<sup>i</sup>

Tuning into what messages your body is receiving from the senses enables us to be more attuned to our environment and which elements may distress us, make us feel unsafe and uncomfortable, which sensory experiences calm us and those that alert us. This enables us to prepare our bodies for an environment and situation. It also allows us to identify what emotions we may be feeling through the messages our body is telling us. When we are less aligned to our bodies and unable to accurately perceive what emotions we are feeling, we may inappropriately react to what we are experiencing.

Those who have experienced trauma may feel overwhelmed by the trigger of a sensory stimulus without accurately identifying the sensory input and what their body is feeling, by shutting down and detaching from their body in a freeze response. Being able to stay attuned to the body and what it is feeling can lessen the intensity of the fight, flight or freeze response and prevent the person from shutting down in reaction to the sensory input and their emotional overwhelm. This is an important step in learning to manage the trauma response. Feeling the body's response keeps the person in the current moment rather than experiencing the emotion of the trauma once more in the current situation. Practising body awareness during talk therapy through exposure to sensory stimuli keeps the person grounded and relegates the trauma to the past. The person learns they have the skills to manage emotions that arise in association to trauma triggers by tuning into their body and self-regulating their nervous system.

Without body awareness, we may exacerbate uncomfortable sensations we are experiencing in a situation. Recognising muscle tension, shaking hands, tightness in the abdomen, racing heart rate and heavy breathing alerts us to a feeling of fear, distress, anxiety, anger and we are able to tune into what our body needs and react accordingly. If it is fear we are feeling, we can call for help, prepare to fight the source of the threat, or remove ourselves from the situation. If it is anger we recognise, we can take steps to provide a sensory input to calm our nervous system or we can choose to move from the stressor. Being aware of our body messages and what they mean to us can allow us to respond appropriately to keep ourselves and our nervous system safe and functioning in the optimal level for the situation.

Likewise, awareness of our body enables us to identify if it is fear we are feeling or excitement. Release of adrenalin when waiting in nervous anticipation to perform a speech, play music in a public concert or to compete in a basketball game, can raise our level of alertness to perform in a heightened state of alertness, mental acuity and body functioning if we recognise the butterflies in the belly and jittery feeling in the limbs and the urge to go the bathroom as performance nerves that are serving to activate and enhance our bodily functioning. We can take simple steps to provide ourselves with sensory input such as deep breathing or jumping on the spot to calm these nerves to a manageable state. If the nerves are left unchecked without exposure to sensory input, they may increase in intensity to a performance inhibiting level, decreasing our ability to function at an optimal level with a fight, flight or freeze response being activated.

Sensations draw on past experience in the brain. The brain identifies that the stimulus has been received before and the body responded in this way. This response may have been helpful to the management of the stimulus or it may have hindered processing of the sensory input for a desired response. Such is the experience in trauma when the fragrance that an abuser wore during the



abuse triggers a fight, flight or freeze response in a trauma survivor. The brain needs to be retrained that it is safe in the context of the situation and a different bodily response activated.

Similarly with depression, the brain can be redirected from a low feeling by providing an incremental alerting stimulus or multiple stimuli to raise the nervous system from hyper-arousal to an optimal zone of arousal for participation in particular tasks, whether that be home-care, self-care, work, socialising, or exercise. You may find your feelings are low and your behaviours depressive typically during the morning, for example. Your brain is responding to the usual cues and sensory input of the morning by responding with a hypo-aroused state. You can proactively alter this state by designing your morning with alerting stimuli gradually increasing in intensity to self-regulate your body and your emotions. Not only are you providing safe sensations to self-regulate in the moment, you are also training your brain to respond differently to the morning's cues by providing consistently positive, uplifting experiences.

Becoming more aware of your body and what it is feeling gives you a head start in creating the feelings you want to experience in the day. When you are aware you feel sluggish, heavy limbs with a full head, you are able to immediately take action to shift this feeling by exposing your body to sensory input, such as a peppermint tea, sitting outdoors in the warmth and light of the sunshine, feeling the soft breeze on your skin, hearing the bird songs and the sounds of neighbour's cheerful laughter. Then you can continue to build your level of arousal from there to the just right level for your current or pending tasks. Likewise, if you feel anxious or overwhelmed with a tension headache and a heightened state of reactivity to sounds and movement around you, you can provide sensory stimuli like a chamomile tea, lavender scented hand lotion, and soothing, soft music to calm and lower your arousal level.

Through the provision of sensory input, you can self-regulate your body to feel the emotions that you choose and create a lasting feeling of your design as you go about your day. You are in control of your mood and how you experience situations that arise by staying in the moment and connecting to your body, then feeding it the sensations it needs to keep your emotionally regulated and enjoying life at your optimal level.

Unexpected emotions no longer need derail your day when you tune into your body and observe that a situation or a person gives you an unpleasant tightness in your abdomen and a feeling that you wish to move away quickly. You can acknowledge your body's discomfort and respond appropriately with action, taking time to identify when your body no longer feels unsafe or in distress, for example. Tuning into your body gives you clues into your emotional world that you may not be cognisant of and appropriately responding to, to keep yourself emotionally regulated. By mindfully feeling your body you can heighten your optimal experience of situations and moments, for instance, the joy of being in nature, the tranquillity of a piece of music, the exhilaration of an amusement park ride, the sweet fragrance of a baby. You can intensify the feeling by feeding it more sensation or you can ease off the intensity to reach the just right level. You have control of the experience how you want to feel. The story is in how your body is feeling. Make the best use of your wonderful asset, your body, by tuning into how it is feeling in any moment. Then feed it the sensory input it needs to keep it feeling just right or to shift it to this optimal zone. Your body, your choice, your control. Your self-regulation. Body awareness speaks the language of emotion for your gain.

When you experience an emotion, it is expressed in how your body feels. To ignore these signs in your body can result in ongoing and intensified stress if the nervous system is already under duress. People who fail to or are unable to respond to sensory distress through self-regulation are susceptible to experiencing anxiety and depression if left unmanaged. As Tsur's research found, it is



our receptiveness to bodily sensations in body awareness, to identify and differentiate between sensations, that is important to mental clarity. By actively increasing our awareness of our bodily sensations, we are enhancing our mental precision and sharpening our emotional control. Our lucidity and emotional intelligence aren't defined at birth. We can shape and refine these by proactively developing our attunement to our body to intentionally manage them for optimal performance in our daily life.

## Sensory Experiences to Raise Your Body Awareness

Raise your body awareness in a simple manner with these easy techniques:

- Direct the cold water shower jet on various parts of the body for 10 seconds or longer per body part.

*Observe the sensations on your skin. Does it look and feel different? How do you feel inside your body?*

- Massage different parts of your body with your hands, run a brush over your skin, or apply a deep pressure massage to your muscles in your limbs by rolling a tennis ball or sensory ball across the length of your muscles.

*What sensations do you notice in your body? Does it tickle, hurt, feel uncomfortable or pleasant? Does it calm or make you feel more alert?*

- Splash cold water on your face and observe the body sensations you experience.

*Does it tingle? Is it refreshing or uncomfortable? How do your eyes feel? Do you get goosebumps on other parts of your body? Does the towel feel scratchy on your skin whilst drying it or is it a soothing, warming, and comforting feel? Is it calming or alerting? Maybe it unsettles you?*

- Suck and chew on ice cubes.

*Is the ice numbing to your tongue, gums, and inner cheeks? Does biting down on the ice make you shiver? Does the ice hurt your teeth? Do you have goosebumps on your skin? Does chewing and sucking the ice make you feel more alert?*

- Walk barefoot across the grass.

*Is the sensation grounding for you or is it uncomfortable?*

- Have a friend run a feather or blade of grass across your arm?



*Is it pleasant? Does it tickle or itch? Do you want to make it stop or for it to continue? Is it unsettling and uncomfortable for you? Does it give your skin goosebumps?*

- Walk barefoot across dry sand then wet sand.

*Do you have a preference for the dry or wet sand? Is the sand comfortable or unpleasant or even intolerable? Do your footsteps on the dry sand make a sound? If yes, is this sound uncomfortable to your ears, sending shivers down your spine?*

- Eat something frozen and sweet like frozen passionfruit or pineapple.

*Does it give you the feeling of a brain freeze? Does it tingle unbearably at the corner of your jaw? Does it make you scrunch your eyes as you take a bite?*

- Rub a coarse fabric across different parts of your body, followed by a soft fabric such as velvet, satin, or velour.

*How do the different fabrics feel on your skin? How do the fabrics make you feel inside?*

- Rub the soles of your feet and the palms of your hands with a toothbrush.

*Does it tickle or prickle? Is it calming or alerting? Is it comfortable for you?*

- Sit in front of a fan blowing on your face and hair.

*How does the breeze feel ruffling your hair? Is it pleasant or uncomfortable? Calming or alerting?*

These exercises and other body exercises like these are examples of sensory stimuli that help you focus on different body parts. Become aware of what your body is feeling both as part of the body part exposed to the sensory input in addition to how other parts of your body may be reacting. How do these sensations make you feel inside? Joyful, tense, frustrated, annoyed, relaxed, calm, jovial, angry, distressed?

Your emotions are a physical reaction in your body. By tuning in to your body and becoming aware of the sensations you are feeling, you learn to recognise and identify emotions. This further sets you up to provide the sensory input your body needs to generate the emotions you desire. Emotion regulation is within your control.



## Incorporating Sensory Regulation into Your Day

The first step in achieving emotion regulation in depression through sensory regulation:

The first step in regaining your life and your personal identity as a fully functioning, capable, resilient, joyful person:

*adopt a sensory approach in your daily lifestyle for sensory and emotion regulation.*

### **Step 1: Raise your body awareness.**

Ask yourself:

- What sensations can I feel in my body, internally and externally?
- Do they hurt, tickle, soothe, nauseate? Are they pleasant or unpleasant, comfortable or uncomfortable?
- How do these sensations make me feel? Joyful, tense, frustrated, annoyed, relaxed, calm, jovial, angry, distressed, uncertain, confused, thrilled, sad, embarrassed, reflective, vulnerable, lacking control, in charge, helpless, ashamed, playful, lethargic, apathetic, energised, alert, volatile, amused?
- Do I want more of this sensation or do I want it to end?
- Do you feel like you want to fight against it verbally or physically or flee from it? Do you feel numb or frozen in place?
- How can you calm or alert yourself if you wish to stop the sensation?
- Did these calming or alerting techniques work? Did you have to try different techniques? Did you leave these sensations unmanaged?

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<sup>i</sup> Noga Tsur, Nirit Berkovitz and Karni Ginzburg "Body Awareness, Emotional Clarity, and Authentic Behaviour: The Moderating Role of Mindfulness" Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2015

