

# **WINNING IS HEALING:**

## **Body Awareness and Empowerment for Abuse Survivors**

An Experiential Workshop for the 2002 Conference of the  
United States Association for Body Psychotherapy<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** The somatic method for trauma recovery described in this paper derives from Being In Movement® somatic education and the martial art of Aikido, and it forms an effective complement to the traditional methods of trauma work. The method is based on the ideas that powerlessness is a core element of the trauma wound; that powerlessness is a somatic state and can be replaced by the somatic state of empowerment; and that growth and healing must be anchored by tangible experience of success in controlling the environment. The primary content of the work is practical, step-by-step exercises which work with breathing, muscle tone, posture, movement and intention to develop an integrated state of awareness, power, and love and, on that foundation, appropriate personal boundaries and effective self-protection.

**NOTE:** The material in this paper is drawn from my book *Winning is Healing: Body Awareness and Empowerment for Abuse Survivors*, which is available as a downloadable e-book from my website, [www.being-in-movement.com](http://www.being-in-movement.com).

## **POWERLESSNESS AS THE PROBLEM**

Since 1987, most of the clients who have come to me for body education sessions have been adult survivors of child abuse. As a somatic educator and martial artist, I focus on a very body-oriented and practical view of the core problem in abuse. In my work, I have seen over and over again how issues of powerlessness and lack of safety play out in the bodies of people who have been abused, and I have seen how healing it is to help people create effective boundaries and on that basis live more fully in their bodies. (Though my focus here is on abuse, much of the material will apply to other forms of trauma as well.)

From my perspective, the crucial issue in abuse is the learning that takes place during abuse. When someone is abused, whether physically, sexually or emotionally/verbally, they learn that they are profoundly powerless, powerless to control their bodies and their

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environment and create safety. That sense of powerlessness becomes a core element in their self-identity, and many of the symptoms of trauma such as dissociation, drug abuse, body numbness, or acting out involve some feeling/belief on the part of the survivor that they cannot create safety.

I would define a *traumatic event* as an event which overwhelms a person's survival resources. If a non-swimmer falls into deep water, that would very likely be traumatic. If an excellent swimmer falls into deep water, that would probably be fun. An event is not, in and of itself, traumatic. What is traumatic is the experience of being overwhelmed by a dangerous event, and what counts as dangerous depends on what resources a person has for coping with the event. Of course, children do not have resources for creating safety, and child abuse is always an overwhelming experience.

I would define the *trauma response* as a physical behavior pattern. Expressed most simply, the core trauma response is to tighten and twist the body. This is generally expressed in tense breathing, tight muscles, constricted posture, stiff movements, and narrowed attention. In a paradoxical way, tightness can often include limpness as well, and this is expressed in states of body numbness or dissociation. The trauma response becomes a fundamental part of the trauma survivor's learned body style and is maintained as a learned behavior until new learning replaces it.

People often experience the tension of the trauma response as a protective barrier between themselves and the trauma. The trauma response often functions as a way of reducing awareness, as a form of anesthesia. When there is nothing practical that can be done to control a threat, then anesthesia offers a means of tolerating it. However, imagine holding your breath, tensing your legs and arms, and trying to dance. How easy and graceful would your movements be? Not very. As a martial artist for over thirty years, I have experienced very clearly that the power to fight or escape an attack comes from relaxed, balanced movement. I have experienced very clearly that our normal shock responses of constriction or dissociation lead not to effective protective action but instead to mindbody weakness and ineffective action. Of course, children who are abused could not take effective action to protect themselves even if by some chance they could stay relaxed, so they are left with the tension response as their way of trying to survive the experience.

Powerlessness and the trauma response, once experienced and incorporated into the self-identity, lead to a vicious circle. When adults live life on the basis of feelings of powerlessness, they respond to threats in ineffective ways, which make it more likely that they will be overwhelmed again and retraumatized.

## EMPOWERMENT AS THE SOLUTION

If the problem is powerlessness, then the solution is to teach resources which create personal power and by so doing retroactively rewrite the old traumatic learning of powerlessness.

I would define *power* as the ability to control the environment and create safety in constructive, life-affirming, respectful ways. (Note that by this definition, harsh, abusive force is not defined as powerful. I usually restrict the word *power* to a positive sense.) The ability to use power and achieve safety is crucial in healing from abuse.

Imagine someone who fell into the water and nearly drowned. She or he is left with a tremendous fear of the water. Verbal work with the feeling of fear is certainly a crucial first step in the healing process. However, talking about the feeling won't teach the person to swim, and complete empowerment must (in this example) include the ability to swim. If the person does not learn to swim, then the person is still powerless and will still feel anxious around water. Without learning to swim, the trauma cannot be healed completely. And learning to swim with gritted teeth and suppressed fear will not be enough. Learning to swim with joy is crucial. Learning to experience joy and mastery in the situation of the previously overwhelming challenge—that is what will finish the recovery.

In the same way, an abuse survivor who has done no more than talk about the emotions involved in the abuse has begun but not finished her/his recovery. Dealing with the effects of trauma on the body is also necessary, and beyond that it is also crucial to learn to protect oneself effectively against the abusive assaults that were experienced.

The first stages of empowerment work involve learning to become aware of and manage the internal, somatic environment and overcome mindbody states such as fear, anger, dissociation, body numbness, and so on. The later stages require learning to deal effectively with external dangers and challenges. In order to practice the skills of creating power and safety, the abuse survivor must be supplied with a carefully graded series of challenging situations within which s/he can safely practice taking charge and exerting control.<sup>2</sup>

I have developed a systematic approach to somatic education, which I call Being In Movement® (BIM) mindbody training<sup>3</sup>, and it is this which forms the basis of my work

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<sup>2</sup> As an aside, safety in abuse recovery is usually thought of as coming from the psychotherapist or other caregiver. By caring about the client and maintaining appropriate boundaries, the caregiver creates a feeling of safety for the client. Certainly this is necessary in recovery. However, if this other-supplied safety is all that the client experiences, the client will remain a victim and will not learn how to create safety for him/herself. In the end, safety must come from within the client.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on BIM, including a number of downloadable articles, see my website, [www.being-in-movement.com](http://www.being-in-movement.com).

with survivors. BIM focuses on the bodily development of awareness, power and love and the ability to use this state of integrity as a foundation for effective action. Integrity is a basis for effective action in every area of life. In addition to work with abuse survivors, I have worked extensively in such seemingly disparate areas as computer ergonomics, music performance, conflict resolution, and self-regulation for children with attention disorders.

BIM is an educational process which uses practical movement experiments to help people learn how to examine the body as the self, and it explores the underlying links between structural/functional efficiency, emotional/spiritual growth, and social change. By examining how breathing, posture, and movement simultaneously *shape* and *are shaped* by thoughts, feelings, and intentions, BIM teaches people how to discover the underlying ideas that rule and restrict their movements and how to develop more effective strategies for action based on mindbody integrity.

Speaking structurally, the state of integrity is one in which the musculoskeletal system is balanced and free of strain. Speaking functionally, the state of mindbody integrity is one that allows stable, mobile, graceful and easy movement. Speaking in terms of intention/energy, this state involves staying anchored in one's core while reaching out into the world with a symmetrical, radiant, expansive awareness and will. Speaking in psychological/spiritual language, this state is an integration of power and love.

## THE METHOD

In BIM, there are three interrelated stages of mindbody practice: awareness, empowerment, and application.<sup>4</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I'll present these as though they were separate elements to be accomplished in a linear progression. In reality, progress in each involves progress in the others, in a back-and-forth teaching/learning process.

### AWARENESS

Abuse survivors come to me for lessons because they are faced with challenges and perceive that they lack resources for meeting those challenges. In order to help them learn new skills, I start by having them study their current responses.

***Movement experiments:*** In order to teach in a concrete fashion, I set up movement experiments which represent people's real-world challenges in the "laboratory" of the movement lesson. Sometimes the experiments are pretty much the same as the real challenge—for example, saying aloud what one's abuse was. However, often the

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<sup>4</sup> For detailed instructions on how to do the basic breathing, body awareness, and centering exercises I teach survivors, see the file *A Downloadable Script for the Eight Core BIM Exercises* on my website.

experiments are simpler, safer representations of the real challenge—for example, being hit by a thrown piece of tissue paper instead of being hit by a hard slap on the face. Sometimes I pick experiments that are trivial or irrelevant—such as dropping pebbles into a cup—precisely because they offer safe, non-triggering opportunities to investigate how a person will respond to a challenge. In any case, it is within the context of the movement experiment that awareness is studied and developed.

Let's take one experiment as an example. I often have students stand up, and I throw tissues at them. I have never met anyone who could not identify this as actually trivial and non-dangerous. However, abuse survivors usually respond to this with some degree of fear since the gesture and the movement so clearly mimic real and dangerous attacks that they experienced. (Before I start any movement experiment, I create a safety contract, which is that the student has the right to stop any experiment if it seems too difficult. And as I start working, I am constantly monitoring the student's responses to make sure that the experiment presents some challenge, but only a relatively minor challenge.)

After I throw the tissue, I ask students to tell me what their responses are to the experiment. In describing how they responded to the experiment, most people talk about their feelings, and they talk about them as mental states. They were surprised, angry, afraid and so on. They wanted to escape or fight back. However, a very different way of paying attention to one's responses is possible.

***Body-based language:*** I ask people to refrain for a time from using common, mind-based language and use instead body-based language. I ask them to notice the details of their muscle tone, breathing, body alignment, and the rhythms and qualities of movement. *Where* in their body do they feel significant changes? *What* are they *doing* in those locations? I ask them to notice what they do in their throat, belly and pelvis. I direct their attention to what happens in the chest and back, the face and head. I ask them to notice what they do with their arms/hands and legs/feet, and I have them focus on what happens to their breathing.

By paying attention to the physical details of responses, people begin to see what they actually do when they are challenged. Rather than simply become overwhelmed by their feelings, students can begin to gain some distance from their responses and objectively monitor their *body actions*.

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

Some people find that they get limp as a response to being hit with a tissue. Their breathing and muscles sag; or they look away and space out, simply waiting for the hit to

be over. They may feel their awareness shrink down to a point or slide away into the distance.

***Purpose of Response:*** The common denominator among responses of tensing or getting limp is the process of getting smaller. Once the response is identified, the next problem is to identify its function or purpose. Why do people tighten up or get limp? I ask students to pay attention to their body actions, to stay in touch with them whatever they might be, and savor them. As they do that, students begin to feel more and more deeply the actions and the feelings, beliefs, and purposes that underlie them.

As a general rule, the actions of tightening or getting limp are some way of dealing with the attack, either trying to brace for it or trying to wait it out. The purpose underlying most responses to various challenges is creating safety. I don't explain this to students, but in feeling their way into the various body actions which are responses to challenges, they realize that what they are trying to do is control the threat, their responses to it, or their awareness of it.

***Evaluation of Response:*** Once people know what they are doing and why they are doing it, the next step is to help students evaluate their responses. Evaluating the responses means discovering whether or not the responses are effective and comfortable ways of responding to the challenge.

I teach students to evaluate their responses by reframing them as *testable hypotheses* about how to handle challenges. For example, if a student holds her breath when she tries to dodge the tissues I throw at her, I might have her reframe that action as the hypothesis "Holding my breath helps the movement of dodging the tissues." Once it is reframed that way, how to test that hypothesis becomes apparent. I have the student dodge the tissues a few times, breathing during some of the trials and holding her breath during others. It is always obvious to people that holding the breath restricts movement, interferes with dodging and therefore reduces safety.

The point of this process is that once a person discovers an action to be ineffective, s/he then has the option of replacing that action with a more effective one. This is, of course, where the empowerment training starts. If holding the breath reduces effectiveness, then the student can deliberately begin cultivating the habit of breathing when responding to a challenge. Of course, what is habitual usual feels right, and what is unhabitual usually feels wrong, but the process of cultivating better responses begins with rejecting what one has discovered to be ineffective in favor of what one has experienced and therefore intellectually knows to be more effective.

Often the opposite of customary but problematic responses is not easy for students to find, and I have to teach them comparison actions which I know will be more effective. By having a better action to compare their responses to, students can clearly experience and understand that their customary, constricted responses are not truly effective.

Many survivors find this new awareness depressing. They feel bad about themselves for choosing ineffective actions. It is important to reassure abuse survivors that the choices they have made are not their fault. They had no better resources at the time of their abuse. By experiencing that they can in the present learn better ways of responding, survivors leave the lessons feeling good about themselves.

***Intentionality:*** Another element of the process of developing and deepening awareness has to do with intentionality.<sup>5</sup> Intention is the process that shapes posture, movement, and action. Helping people directly experience the intentional foundations of their actions is a way of both moving them to take responsibility for their responses and showing them how to improve their responses.

To create an operational definition of “intention,” I put something, a pencil for example, about ten feet (about three meters) in front of a student and instruct her/him to want it. I ask the student to actually *intend* to go over and get the pencil. It must be an authentic wanting. It must be felt in the body.

“Wanting” does not mean either merely *thinking about* or *actually going* and getting the pencil. And it doesn’t include stiffening the body. It is a sincere somatic sensation of desire. Most people can create an authentic feeling of wanting when they focus on it, though many need some personal guidance to home in on it. What I’m after is just letting the body experience the wanting and react to it naturally and spontaneously.

Once people can establish this feeling, they usually feel themselves “involuntarily” tipping toward the pencil. For most people, this movement will be a small drift toward the pencil, perhaps an eighth of an inch (about a third of a centimeter) or so, though some people will actually move quite a bit. Most people will feel as though the pencil were a magnet gently drawing them towards it. (Some people will move away from the pencil, which usually is an expression of some need to reject their own desires).

When you have an image of a movement and intend to execute the movement, your brain sends nerve impulses to the muscles which will accomplish the movement. The muscles can act with a range of force, from a barely perceptible tensing to an all-out clenching. However, even below the range of what is barely perceptible to most people, there is still physical activity, the faintest stirrings of the muscles. You could call these faint, normally imperceptible tensings “micromovements.” All you have to do is wish to begin moving in some direction and your body will begin to do that movement, either at a microlevel or in larger, more obvious ways.

The pencil-wanting exercise is a way to help people begin to feel and notice the micromovements which are the small beginnings of the action of going to get the pencil.

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<sup>5</sup> For more details on the intentional processes underlying powerlessness and power, see the paper *Being In Movement: Intention as a Somatic Meditation*, which is downloadable from my website.

The point of helping people notice this unbroken continuum from thought to movement is to give them a clear realization that there is no separation between the mind and the body. Intending something is the beginning of doing it. And underlying every action, is the intent to do that action, though people are not often aware of the volitional foundations of their actions. (To be more precise, every complex action has an intentional foundation. Simple reflex movements do not arise from intentions.) Experiencing the intentional foundations of action moves people in the direction of taking responsibility for the things they do.

Beyond that, working on the subtle level of intentionality—along with the more obvious elements of breath, posture, and movement—is helpful in replacing ineffective actions with more effective ones. By noticing the first faint stirrings of the decisions to execute habitual, ineffective actions, and replacing them with the intentions to execute more effective actions, people can practice and learn better response habits. This is the process of empowerment: replacing powerless ways of acting and living with more powerful ways.

## **EMPOWERMENT**

I begin the process of empowerment with a somatic definition of powerlessness. Weakness involves patterns of body sensation, posture and movement which are small and uneven. These body patterns are constricted or collapsed, and they are lopsided or twisted. Empowerment is a process of responding to challenges not with habitual weak intentions/actions but with new intentions/actions of awareness, strength, love, openness, and freedom. Empowerment is at once a physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual state. The clearest way to explain the process of empowerment is by describing some of the basic exercises I use.

***Breathing:*** Constricting the breath is a key element in the experience of powerlessness, and breathing more openly is the foundation for empowerment. I start by having students stand up and alternate tightening their bellies and letting them plop out. Then I have them release their bellies without doing a preliminary tightening. People generally experience a noticeable release even though they had not first tightened their bellies consciously, and they realize from this that they had been unconsciously holding themselves tight and that they probably hold themselves tight all the time. I have them touch their bellies and experiment with their breathing until they discover how to drop the movement of inhalation into the pit of their bellies, expanding the belly and the lower back as well as the chest when they inhale. This is just the opposite of the pattern of breathing involved in fear or anger.

To give people a clear experience of the effect of constricting their breath, I have them stand and resist a light push on the shoulders, first while constricting their breath and then while letting their breathing be soft and full. People readily notice that they are far more stable when they breathe easily. Victim breathing makes one a pushover.

***Pelvic Stabilization:*** The experience of postural stability is crucial in developing the feeling of empowerment and security. I start teaching this by having people feel how slumping and sitting up straight are done. Most people think that straightening up is done by throwing the shoulders back or by straightening the back, and practically no one notices that the whole process is built around pelvic rotation. When the pelvis rotates toward the rear (if the pelvic bowl were filled with water, rotation to the rear would spill the water down the backs of the legs), the stack of vertebrae has no foundation on which to rest and it slumps down. Rotating the pelvis forward, in the appropriate way, provides a foundation for the spinal column and the torso as a whole and creates upright posture.

Most people rotate the pelvis forward by using the superficial muscles in the back to pull upward on the rear edge of the pelvis. I have students experience this by pulling their shoulder blades and back pockets together, and they feel how their backs arch and their postures become tense and top heavy.

To find the more effective way of coming to an upright sitting posture, I ask students to slump and notice that when they do, the pubic symphysis (the bone in front of the pelvis, just above the genitals) points upwards. The more appropriate way to rotate the pelvis forward involves moving the pubic symphysis forward and down so that it points toward the floor. This uses the iliacus and psoas muscles (which are muscles deep in the front of the body) to do the movement. This new sitting posture creates an effortless stability; it also leads to a physical sensation of exhilaration and power which is the opposite of the constriction produced by fear and weakness.

***Efficient Walking:*** Walking—moving through space—is fundamental in making contact with the world. If you ask people how they walk forward, they often answer that it is because they pick up a leg, move it forward, and then drop their weight onto it.

To develop people's awareness of just what they are doing when they walk, I have them stand and push on a wall, with their feet far enough from the wall that their bodies incline forward quite a bit. Usually people believe that they push on the wall with their arms and shoulders, and they don't notice the contribution of the legs and hips. One way of clarifying this is to have them bend their knees quite a bit and then straighten their legs rapidly as though they were trying to push the floor backwards away from the wall. As they do this, they experience that the force transmitted to the wall by their hands increases. This helps them begin to understand that the traction of the feet on the floor and the shove back and down with the legs is what creates the forward shove on the wall. This realization transforms their awareness so that they experience the lower half of their bodies as active and powerful. For sexual abuse survivors, this can be a radical change in their body sense.

Having students walk with this new awareness transforms their walking. Having them step forward by an exaggerated pressing down and back with the ball of the back foot gives them a new experience of walking. The back/down energy reflects off the floor into a forward/up movement of the body. They have a ground to stand on, a foundation for

themselves. Their posture opens upward. Their walk becomes more erect, clearer and more energetic. When people conceive of walking as falling down onto their forward foot, rather than springing up off their back foot, they sag and fall downward as they walk. Their energy droops. The new way of moving is mechanically more efficient and powerful. It is also much more confident and alert.

One of the key elements that I emphasize in teaching is verticality. It is no accident that we say the goal of moral development is to lead an upright life. And it is no accident that the primary meaning of the word “attitude” refers to the posture or position of someone or something, though our most common use of the word now refers to a person's psychological stance. Depression, anger, fear, self-doubt, self-hatred and such negative emotions all create twisting, cramping or collapse in the body. Learning to feel the link between negative feelings and constricted body states and learning to find a natural openness is a very powerful process for healing old wounds. Helping people gain experience of and skill in creating and maintaining the vertical line in walking is part of the process of helping them elucidate their inner patterns and find a clearer and stronger way of being and doing.

**Love:** The next step in the development of power is rather surprising to most people. I start by asking people to imagine a situation in which they have to deal with a boss who is antagonistic and critical, and I have them note the physical changes this produces. Generally it creates tension in the chest and shortening of the breath as well as other tensions throughout the body. Then I have people imagine someone or something that makes their heart smile. This not only reverses the changes created by imagining the uncomfortable situation but also produces sensations of relaxation, warmth, softness and openness in the chest.<sup>6</sup> These sensations of being “warm-hearted” are the bodily manifestations of love, compassion or forgiveness. Not only does the chest soften, but the whole body becomes freer and more unified, and this improves the coordinated delivery of power in any action.

Power and love, contrary to the model that our culture uses, really are inseparable. Love without power is limp and ineffective, and power without love is rigid and harsh. (Here I am using the terms with their more usual meanings, as though they were in fact separable.) In either case, love or power is diminished to the point where it becomes just a shadow and not true power or love at all. Power is the foundation for the ability to love, and love is the foundation for the wise use of power. This is not mere philosophy but is simply a shorthand method of stating that the body and the self must be soft and receptive as well as integrated and strong in order to function well.

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<sup>6</sup> I learned this exercise from Stephen Levine, who works with meditations on the heart. See his book *Who Dies? Conscious Living and Conscious Dying*, Anchor Books, Garden City, 1982.

***Expansiveness:*** The Six Directions Breathing exercise is a way of putting all of the work on body awareness, power and love into an easily practiced whole. I have people sit quietly with their eyes shut. First they adjust their posture and breathing. Next they inhale into the core of their body just below the navel. And as they exhale, they employ a regular progression of exhaling outward into the six cardinal directions. With one breath for each directional focus, they gently exhale down, up, right, left, forward, backward, and then they exhale in all six directions at once.

This exercise is a way of practicing keeping an open, even, symmetrical, expansive awareness of the whole body. More than that, it is a way of contacting the feeling of being fully in the world. Any fear, anger, suppression of emotions, etc. produces dim spots or twists and asymmetries in the feeling of the body's field of energy/attention. Finding those gaps in the field and breathing life back into them is a way of remembering to live fully in the body, in the present, and in the world. It is the basic process of empowerment. One can do the exercise projecting simultaneously from the heart as well as the belly, enlarging the focus to include love as well as power.

This breathing exercise is helpful because it gives people a sense of the fundamental level at which choice or intention operates to structure the body and behavior. It gives them a tool for practicing different ways of being. And as they build up skill with this tool, they can use it unobtrusively during stressful situations to interrupt old patterns and substitute new ones.

## **APPLICATION**

Problematic feelings and survival behaviors maintained by abuse survivors persist because they seem like the only way to handle the pain and survive. What appear to be negative feelings and behaviors are maintained by their positive functions. The self-system won't let go of the feelings and behaviors until it is provided with new options that are clearly more effective and more comfortable as survival tools. The goal of empowerment work is to teach people how to create a centered state and use it in place of their habitual patterns of fear and weakness.

Learning to become aware of the trauma responses is the first step, and learning to create the state of power is the second step, but these must be followed by the realistic application of power. It is in applying power that the abuse survivor becomes deeply convinced that s/he has both the right and the ability to have and use power to create safety. Success in boundary creation and self-protection is crucial in eliminating old coping habits based on powerlessness. Without the anchor of actual success, any new learning will not stick.

For the sake of clarity of exposition, the previous section described a somewhat artificial progression of exercises focusing specifically on empowerment. In actual work with abuse survivors, I would not separate work on developing power from work on applying power. They would be interwoven and would proceed together.

The more serious the abuse (if any abuse could be said to be less serious) the more “irrelevant” the situation I would use to teach power. With more serious abuse, I might start with tasks such as dropping pebbles in a cup or building stacks of small stones. These tasks offer contexts for investigating breathing, posture, and awareness, but they have little or no taint of danger. As a student gains trust in themselves and in me, and skill in body sensing and centering, I might then begin with gentle “attacks.” These could involve such things as telling them that they have too many noses or throwing tissues at them. Gradually I would work my way up to situations which have some resemblance to the specific abuse the students experienced. In the early stages of work, there might not be much obvious application of the body work to anything real, but gradually the realistic nature of the self-protection learning would reveal itself.

For the sake of simplicity, I could say there are five stages of application work. The first stage is simply being in a body in new and more comfortable ways—walking, talking, breathing, and so on with more balance and wholeness, which is the fundamental work done in the empowerment stage. The second stage is practicing emotional/physiological centering. The third stage is practicing boundary control. The fourth stage is actual self-defense combative skills—at first with simple, generic attacks, and later with the specific assaults that were experienced by the individual.

The fifth stage is taking the learning out of the classroom situation and applying it in daily life. This fifth stage, however, is part of the first four stages. As students learn to move differently, they can use the new more comfortable movement in their daily lives. As they learn to replace victim feelings with fullness of breath, students can remember to breathe during their daily lives. As students learn to protect their boundaries, they can act more assertively in their daily lives. Needless to say, actually fighting off real attackers is something we hope they never have to do in their daily lives, but they could if they needed to. As students gain more and more success in using the empowerment material in their daily lives, they come to a point where they realize they have become new people and that they no longer need to come for empowerment lessons.

In this section, I will briefly describe examples of second, third and fourth stage practices in applying power.

***Emotional/Physiological Centering:*** I may yell at a student “You have too many noses.” That can create some fear. I may say to an abuse survivor, “At the count of three, I’m going to come over and touch your hand.” That’s pretty scary. Or I may invite a student to say aloud the name of the person who abused him/her. In all of these instances, most people can easily recognize that there is no real, present threat, but they are triggered and feel anxiety anyway.

Each instance of “attack” gives students the opportunity to practice monitoring and regulating their somatic responses. Since there is no actual threat, then it certainly makes sense to work at creating the centered state of calm alertness. And if there were a real threat, then it would be even more important to be able to respond calmly and alertly. By

using the breathing, posture, movement, and intention skills learned in the empowerment work, students can break free of old habits of emergency arousal and work toward creating new habits of more effective being and functioning.

Of course, as I have said, practicing empowerment isn't linear. It is more like stream-of-consciousness somatic free association. I may start a series of lessons by throwing tissues at a student. The next week they may come in and report that they used the breathing they learned to stay calm during a job interview. Which could remind them of being yelled at by their mother about spilling juice on the carpet when they were six years old, so the lesson might involve practicing being able to talk calmly when I yell at them about the juice. And that might remind them of what it was like to be looked at by their abuser in the moment before abuse began. And so on.

Each layer of somatic response cues the next layer until the student has revealed every element that needs centering practice. I have, for example, developed somatic methods for working with dreams. These same methods work when someone follows an emotional thread into what is apparently a past-life recall. Students provide subtle somatic hints and clues to their inner structure. By staying sensitive to these clues, and working on empowerment with each element that arises, the overall pattern of learning needed for healing from abuse will take form.

***Boundary Control:*** In the stage of Emotional Centering, the student's task is to stay calm and alert in spite of the triggers I apply. That, however, is just the beginning of an effective response. Doing no more than staying calm and alert is like sitting on the railroad tracks and meditating. You will be calm and killed. Effective action is necessary.

If I yell at a student, "You have too many noses," the practice would be to take a moment to calm down and then say something appropriate. If the student cannot think of something, I may supply a practice phrase. "I love my many noses." Or "I do believe you may need new glasses!" The point is to break out of the terror through somatic centering, and then act effectively to maintain proper boundaries. Learning to use calm, direct speech helps students break out of the states of wordless terror or fearful/angry confusion.

If I say to an abuse survivor, "At the count of three, I'm going to come over and touch your hand," the practice would be to stay centered and tell me something like "I don't want you to, and I won't let you." Announcing calmly and strongly that they have feelings and desires, that they have a right to them, and that they will act to preserve their boundaries—all that is new and important for abuse survivors.

There are many, many practices that I use to break boundary control down into small steps which can be practiced in a gradual progression. After having a student practice telling me to stay in my seat, I might have the student throw globs of wet tissue at me when I threaten to come over and touch them. I might have them come stand over me and tell me they won't let me get up. I may have them hit me with a foam bat when I do try

to stand up. In each step, the student must practice on two levels simultaneously, the inner somatic and the outer practical levels.

Along the way, I will discuss issues about power, distinguishing between ethical power and abuse so that students will be clear that protecting themselves is not the same as abusing another. It is important to explain that our culture offers only the two alternatives of being either a victim or an aggressor. It is crucial to help students understand that cultivating power and love leads to a state of integrity that allows people to live in freedom, being neither victim nor aggressor.

***Self-Defense:*** At a certain point, the practice of boundary control slides into the practice of actual self-defense combat techniques. It is crucial that abuse survivors experience that they have the right, the skills, and the ability to actually protect themselves from what hurt them in the past. Otherwise they will continue to feel—and rightly so—that they are still weak, still vulnerable, still victims. In addition, the experience of staying calm and alert, loving and powerful, and fully present in their bodies during the replay and revision of the abuse situation is truly healing.

There is an issue which is important in understanding the use of self-defense training in trauma recovery. Some people may feel that touching someone who has been hurt by touch or replaying an assault would be retraumatizing. However, in this context these are practices in self-regulation and efficacy. It isn't being touched or being assaulted that is retraumatizing, but re-experiencing one's inability to protect oneself. It isn't assault that hurts but losing. Losing is traumatizing. But winning is healing. Experiencing victory over the assault that previously defeated one is profoundly healing.

It is also important that survivors realize that the self-defense instruction I include in trauma work is not a full self-defense course. The self-defense instruction that I teach in BIM lessons is specifically geared toward what each survivor needs to break their specific habits of victim-thinking. I teach each survivor the defenses against the exact assaults they experienced. (If a survivor's memory of their assault is not clear, I teach generic self-defense techniques with the idea that we will probably hit on something close to what the real assault was.) Working with the specific assaults survivors encountered allows them to experience precisely the victory that will be most healing. But I leave out a lot of what I would cover in a full self-defense course. A full self-defense course is not needed here for the specific purpose of the healing work. For students who want more, I encourage them to take a full self-defense course or study a martial art.

However, simply taking a self-defense course will not replace the use of self-defense within somatic re-training sessions. Almost never do self-defense courses pair training in detailed inner somatic awareness and self-regulation with instruction in combat. When this pairing is missing, many survivors will be unable to function effectively in the self-defense course because they will be triggered into habitual, uncontrollable trauma patterns. And many others will be able to function effectively only by cutting themselves off from their inner pain. Either of these two situations will be re-traumatizing.

To give a sense of how self-defense can be used in the service of somatic self-awareness and self-regulation, let us take one exercise as an example. This first photo illustrates the “attack” position. Imagine having a person standing between your legs. Most survivors (and most people who have not experienced abuse) would experience that as a terribly demeaning, vulnerable, dangerous situation.



However, with training, people can keep their breathing calm and their bodies present and alert. With training, people realize that the person lying down is in an effective defensive position. Anyone stupid enough to get between your legs deserves his fate. All you have to do is roll toward your side (as shown on the right) and “scissors” your legs. That scissoring movement will break the attacker’s balance. Doing it hard could break the attacker’s knee. If you keep turning toward your left and drive the attacker down hard into the floor, that could result in serious injury to the attacker.

Experiencing this attack and defense helps people reframe feelings of vulnerability. Vulnerability isn’t black and white. You aren’t vulnerable when someone is doing X or Y or Z to you. You are vulnerable when you lose your center and can’t think clearly. You are vulnerable when you don’t have the defense skills to protect yourself. When you are centered and skillful, you will find that an attack offers wonderful opportunities for defense. Experiencing victory is a tremendously liberating and healing experience. When abuse survivors experience this type of victory in our work together, typically their faces light up with a special grin of freedom and joy.

It is crucial that self-defense teaching should be undertaken only by people with the required skills. It takes a good deal of skill to teach self-defense techniques effectively,

and for the teacher to survive the defenses techniques, s/he must be quite skilled in falling and other protective skills. Psychotherapists without the requisite training may wish to have martial arts instructors teach the self-defense elements of trauma recovery work.

During the course of self-defense instruction, opportunities come up for discussing some significant issues. For example, abuse survivors often think that power is abusive by definition, and this is natural considering what their experience was. However, this frequently means that survivors reject their own power because they don't want to be abusive. It is crucial for survivors to experience that power based on love is ethical and that they have the right to defend themselves. Another issue is that survivors frequently blame themselves for having been weak and defenseless, and they must be reassured that no blame attaches to being hurt. Many other issues will come up in the areas of violence, non-violence, the nature of abuse and what motivates a perpetrator, and so on.

## **CASE STUDY**

As one example of this process of awareness and empowerment, a psychotherapist referred a woman for somatic work as a complement to the verbal therapy. As a little girl, the woman had been raped repeatedly by her father. We will call her Nancy. Often as Nancy and I worked, she looked compressed and hard. Her chin would go up as she pulled her head back and down. She would clench her fists and tighten her shoulders. Along with that compression, paradoxically, came a general collapse. Her body would sag, and she would space out. After we had worked together for a number of sessions, I suggested that to me the combination of hardening and collapsing looked like somebody preparing to lose well. She was hardening herself to be stubborn, take the punishment, and fight back; yet she knew it was hopeless, and her real goal was to just stay stubbornly quiet while she was raped again. Nancy said that was just what her life had been like.

When we first started working together, Nancy's whole body was numb. She was very athletic and strong, but she pursued her athletic training in an obsessive, grinding way, not feeling what she was doing, but driven by a feeling that she had to get fast and strong. Her whole body was tense and she kept her feelings at bay with that tension. As we worked, she was able to relax and start feeling her feelings. She learned that she could reduce the overwhelming feelings by relaxing and centering her breathing and her posture. She found that this was much better than managing her feelings through tension and working herself to exhaustion. This new ability to handle her feelings productively allowed her to do important work with her psychotherapist.

Over the course of six months of every-other-week lessons, I helped Nancy create in her body an integrated state of awareness, power and love. This is a body state of expansiveness and joy. We practiced using that state as a foundation for replacing dissociation and body numbness with presence and confronting honestly what had been done to her. We used that state of body presence as a foundation for practicing skills of

self-defense. She learned to stay present and focused and WIN when I acted the role of her abuser. She experienced that power can be loving and life affirming, and she used this kindhearted power to reclaim her body and her life.

At one point, she mentioned that when she was young her father would often lose his temper, grab her by the throat, and choke her unconscious to shut her up. So we worked with the defense from that choke. Since I practice and teach Aikido, which is a non-violent martial art, my focus in teaching self-defense techniques is the use of gentleness and balance to overcome hardness and violence. With her permission, I choked Nancy, and she practiced keeping herself calm and alert. Once she was able to do so, I showed her a simple technique that utilizes a relaxed spiral of movement to dislodge the choke and bring the attacker under control. She loved the feeling of doing it, and did it over and over on me, throwing me off her with great joy.

Some weeks later, she came in for a lesson with a particularly glowing grin. I asked her what she was grinning about, and she said that she'd had to go back to her parents' house that weekend, and her father got angry and tried to choke her. This time, though, she used what I'd shown her. Rather than holding her breath and dissociating, she automatically breathed and dropped into the posture of balance, power and love that we had been practicing. Her father never even got his hands around her throat. She parried his grab, spun him around and threw him up against a wall. She told him, clearly and strongly, "You can never do that to me again!" Then she left.

Nancy did not respond to the attack with tension, fear, and shock, which would have led to her losing yet again. Nor did she respond with rage and brutality, which would have created further inner pain even had she won the fight. She responded with loving power, which allowed her to win and win in a way that was healing to her. That is true safety. Through her own skilled efforts, as an adult, she succeeded where as a child she had been defeated. Being able to be present in the body and enforce effective boundaries through one's own joyful power is the essence of safety. And safety leads to healing and feelings of self-worth.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The work I do with abuse survivors is based on the challenge/response model of martial art teaching, and it makes use of both somatic education techniques and self-defense instruction. It is an educational, skill-building approach. It is fundamentally about empowerment, that is, the ability to maintain the boundaries of the self.

Detailed written descriptions of the techniques of body education and self-defense that I teach demand a good deal of space, more space than would be appropriate here. For those readers interested in seeing exactly how the techniques are done, my book, *Winning is Healing*, is a detailed and extensive description of the somatic education methods I have developed and their use in helping abuse survivors.

As an aside, though most of the work I do is with abuse survivors, I have applied the approach with other forms of trauma as well. People who are survivors of car crashes, surgery, and so on, will have somatic responses to being overwhelmed that are essentially the same as those experienced by abuse survivors. The first two stages of awareness and empowerment can be applied exactly as described. The third stage can be applied in what is essentially a physical metaphor. For example, I was working with a woman who'd been in a serious car crash. First I helped her notice and feel the physical ways she responded when she said the words "car crash." Then I showed her how to construct the expansive, centered body state. And finally, I used mock self-defense instruction as a metaphor. I had the woman walk around the room. I held my hands up as though I were holding a steering wheel, shouted "honk, honk" and bumped into her. When she was able to keep breathing, stay alert and calm, and get out of my way, she experienced a profound sense of relief.

There is always some way to represent a traumatic situation in a body/movement metaphor. And a fundamental element in overcoming a trauma is showing the survivor how to use purposive, effective behavior to take control of the situation. Healing is about moving out of the domain of automatic fight/flight/freeze behavior into the realm of free and effective choice.

However, for the deepest healing to take place, purposive and effective behavior must have a solid foundation of correct body alignment, proper breathing, and expansive intentionality. To focus on a clear purpose, and to execute that purpose effectively demands correct use of the body. Merely pushing someone away, for example, while gritting one's teeth, stopping one's breath, and scrunching one's shoulders, won't be as healing. Healing comes from reclaiming joy as a foundation for power. And joy is a by-product of correct body use.

Abuse survivors have to explore and master their old assaults in order to move beyond them. Of course, it is impossible to change the past, but by replaying their abuse and changing their responses and the outcomes, survivors can change who they are in the present. By learning to maintain body awareness, calmness, power and love; by learning to respond by speaking their truth clearly and assertively; by learning to protect themselves effectively, abuse survivors can experience their present ability to defeat what once defeated them. They will then experience themselves as truly safe and free.

Empowerment is not a feeling; it is the realistic capacity for effective action to control danger. (Having said this, it is true that even when the traumatizing danger was realistically beyond human control, it is still possible to use mock self-defense to re-ignite the capacity and the feeling for self-protection.) Many survivors arrange their lives to feel safe, but survivors often feel safe when they are not really safe. They may numb themselves through drugs or dissociation or many other dysfunctional coping strategies and simply deny real dangers. Verbal work on healing trauma, though crucial, can sometimes encourage survivors to focus on developing the feeling rather than the reality

of being safe simply because verbal work may focus on the exploration of feelings rather than on the development of practical skills for action,

Psychotherapy, somatic education and self-defense or martial art training all complement each other. Somatic education and martial arts need therapy to help survivors process their feelings, and therapy needs body awareness education and self-protection methods to help survivors reclaim their bodies and their boundaries. Survivors should have access to all three forms of work, and professionals in all three areas should work together for the benefit of abuse survivors.

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