

Body Awareness

You will learn:

- *How the mind and body interact*
- *How to recognize tension in your body*
- *Exercises to recognize and let go of tension in your body*

The ability to recognize how your body reacts to the stressors in your life can be a powerful skill. Most people are more aware of the weather, and the time of day, or their bank balance than they are of the tension in their own bodies or their personal stress response. Your body registers stress long before the conscious mind does. Muscle tension is your body's way of letting you know that you are under stress, and body awareness is the first step towards acknowledging and reducing stress.

You inevitably tense your body when you experience stress. When the stress is removed, the tension will go away. Also, chronic muscular tension occurs in people with particular beliefs or attitudes and tends to tighten specific muscle groups. For example, a woman who believes it is bad to express anger is likely to have chronic neck tension and pain, while, a man experiencing a lot of anxiety about the future may develop chronic stomach problems. This chronic muscular tension restricts digestion, limits self expression, and decreases energy. Every contracted muscle blocks movement.

Differentiating between your external awareness and your internal awareness in order to separate the world from your physical reaction to it is important. External awareness includes all stimulation to the five senses from the outside world. Internal awareness refers to any physical sensation, feeling, emotional discomfort, or comfort inside your body. Much of the tension in your body isn't felt because most of your awareness is directed towards the outside world. Below, you will learn about Gestalt exercises designed to locate and explore your body tension.

Internal Versus External Awareness

1. First focus your attention on the outside world. Start sentences with, "I am aware of" (for example, "I am aware of the cars going by the outside window, papers moving, the coffee perking, the breeze blowing, and the blue carpet.")
2. After you have become aware of everything that is going on around you, shift to focusing your attention on your body and your physical sensations- Your internal world. (for example, " I am aware of feeling warm, my stomach gurgling, tension in my neck, nose tickling, and a cramp in my foot.")
3. Shuttle back and forth between internal and external awareness. (For example, " I am aware of the chair pushing into my buttocks, the circle of yellow light from the lamp, my shoulders hunching up, the smell of bacon.")
4. Used at free moments through the day, this exercise allows you to separate and appreciate the real difference between your inner and outer worlds.

Body Scanning

Close your eyes, starting with your toes and moving up your body, ask yourself " Where am I tense?"

Whenever you discover a tense area, exaggerate it slightly so you can become aware of it.

Be aware of the muscles in your body that are tense. Then, for example say to yourself,

" I am tensing my neck muscles... I am hurting myself... I am creating tension in my body. "

Note that all muscle tension is self produced.

At this point, be aware of any life situation that may be causing you the tension in your body and what you could do to change it.

Letting Go of Your Body

Lie down on a rug or a firm bed and get comfortable.

Pull your feet up until they rest flat on the floor and close your eyes.

Check yourself for comfort. (This may require shifting your body around.)

Become aware of your breathing....feel the air move into your nose, mouth, and down your throat into your lungs.

Focus on your body and let all of the parts come into your awareness spontaneously.

What parts of your body come into awareness first?

What parts are you less aware of?

Become aware of which parts of your body you can feel easily and which parts of your body have little sensation.

Do you notice any difference between the right and left side of your body?

Now become aware of any physical discomfort you are feeling.

Become aware of this discomfort until you can describe it in detail.

Focus and be aware of what happens to this discomfort. It may change..... Scan your body for any residual tension or discomfort and let it go with each exhalation.

Continue letting go for five to ten minutes, allowing your body to take over.

Stress Awareness Diary

Some parts of the day are more stressful than others, and some events are more likely to produce physical and emotional symptoms than others. Certain types of stressful events often produce characteristic symptoms. For this reason keeping a record of stressful events, as well as symptoms that may have been a stress reaction, is useful. Make extra copies of the blank form on the next page for your diary.

Keep a stress awareness diary for two weeks. Make a note of the time a stressful event occurs and the time you notice a physical or emotional symptom that could be related to stress.

The following stress awareness diary is from the Monday department store clerk.

<i>Time</i>	<i>Stressful Event</i>	<i>Symptom</i>
8:00	Alarm doesn't go off, late rushing	
9:30		Slight headache
11:00	Customer is rude and insulting	
11:15		Anger, tightness in stomach
3:00	Return of three big ticket items, much paperwork	
3:15		Depression slight headache
5:30	Heavy Commute traffic	
6:30	Irritable with son	Anger pounding headache
6:35	Wife defends son	tightness in stomach

As you can see the diary identifies how particular stresses result in predictable symptoms. Interpersonal confrontations may characteristically be followed by stomach tension.

Rushing may be causing vasoconstriction (tightening of the blood vessels) for this individual, who as a result experiences irritability and headaches. You can use your stress awareness diary to discover and chart your stressful events and characteristic reactions.

As you use these body awareness exercises you will begin to recognize where your body stores muscular tension. When you allow yourself increased awareness you can find ways to let go of the tension you discover. Along with the release of tension you will experience increased energy and a sense of well being.

To keep a convenient record of how you feel before and after your relaxation exercises use the following record of general tension.

Record of General Tension

Rate yourself on this 10-point scale before and after you do your relaxation exercise.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Totally Relaxed	very relaxed	moderately relaxed	fairly relaxed	slightly relaxed	slightly tense	fairly tense	moderately tense	very tense	extremely tense <small>(the most uncomfortable you could be)</small>

Week of	Before Session	After Session	Comments
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

Your personal mind-body connection and the interactions between your thoughts, body, and social environment are an integral part of beginning to manage stress in your life, as opposed to letting it manage you. These activities will begin that process.

Further Reading

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