

LIVING BETTER WITH *YouRself*



A Practical Guide
to Embodied Growth

Michael Conti

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to Embodied Growth

MICHAEL CONTI



The Horse's Mouth

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02

OUR BODY

Bring to mind the image of a coin. If you have one close by, hold it in your hand. Take note of its head side. Flip it over and look at the tail side. Where does the head stop and the tail begin? Is the coin separate from the head or the tail? Can you have a head or a tail without there being a coin?

We can think of our body, thoughts and emotions in a similar way. Our thoughts and emotions are like the head and the tail. They exist together – one cannot exist without the other, but they're both different aspects of ourselves. Our body, like the coin, holds them all together. In the same way that we cannot separate the head and the tail from the coin, our emotions and thoughts cannot be separated from our body. And in the same way that the head and the tail are expressions of the coin's body, our thoughts and emotions are both expressions of our body and have the power to shape it. After all, without our body, we don't exist.



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And yet, we often discount our body. We don't give it the importance it deserves or we focus on some of its aspects and ignore its link to our emotions and thoughts. We see it as something separate. But our body is us, as much as our emotions and thoughts are.

Our emotions and thoughts affect what happens in our body. If we're feeling sad or helpless, we tend to slouch and look down. If we're anxious, our eyes dart around, we get fidgety and we might even have bowel problems. If we're angry, we can tense our muscles, make fists with our hands, hit something or experience tightness in our chest. If we try hard to remember something, we frown.

Because our body is so intimately linked to our emotions and thoughts, when these are very strong, they can end up being stored in our body. This is particularly the case with traumatic situations where our body remembers the trauma even though our consciousness might have 'forgotten' it.

The opposite is also true. Our body affects our emotions and our thinking. If we clench our fists for some time, we start feeling some anger. If we get a massage, we feel relaxed and we stop worrying for a while. If we exercise, we feel more energetic. If we're always slouched, it will lower our confidence. Hence, our emotions, thoughts and body are constantly affecting each other.

The first step towards being happier with oneself is to accept how we feel, what we think and how our body behaves without judging these as being right or wrong. Only then can we use our emotions, thoughts and body to bring about the change that we desire in our lives.

When we struggle with our emotions or thoughts, we often try to change them directly. If we're feeling sad, we try to think of positive things. If we feel anxious, we try to examine our thoughts and emotions in order to understand why we're feeling that way. If we worry too much, we try to think differently. This can be very helpful at times, but sometimes we still don't succeed in bringing about the change we desire. The reason for this is that we're attempting to use parts of our mind to control other parts of our mind. But our mind knows itself much better than we do and so it's very difficult to trick it or to control it. When this happens, it's best to focus on our body as a means to sidestep the complicated distortions our mind can create.

The following are some fundamental exercises to help you increase your awareness of your body and your ability to use this to change your emotions, thoughts and behaviour. In the rest of the book, you will encounter additional exercises that focus on your body in relation to specific topics. Remember to choose which exercises you feel are relevant to you rather than just going from one to the next.

Breathing

Breathing activates the core of our torso, a place where we store many emotions. Many of us tend to breathe quite shallowly using primarily the upper chest. Some of us take deeper breaths and engage the diaphragm more. The deeper we breathe, the better we connect to our body. The deepest kind of breathing can be achieved by trying to breathe right down to our anus, thus engaging the whole torso and activating different energy centres in our body. The following are some breathing techniques that you can practise on your own. Some of them are geared more towards relaxing the body, while others are geared more towards activating it.

01. *Square breathing*



This breathing technique helps you achieve a general sense of relaxation and can be especially useful before sleeping. Breathe gently and feel free to change the duration of the counting to suit your needs.

- ❖ Inhale counting to 4.
- ❖ Hold your breath for a count of 4.
- ❖ Exhale counting to 4.
- ❖ Pause between breaths for a count of 4.

02. *4-7-8 breathing*



This breathing technique helps you achieve general relaxation.

- ❖ Exhale slowly and completely through your mouth.
- ❖ Inhale quietly and deeply through your nose counting to 4.

- ❖ Hold your breath for a count of 7.
- ❖ Exhale slowly and completely through your mouth for a count of 8.

03. ***Hollow body breathing***



This breathing technique helps you to achieve a sense of being present in the here-and-now and to connect more to the inside of your body.

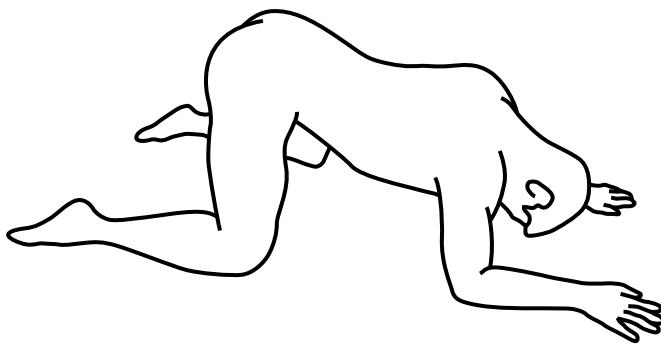
- ❖ Imagine your body as a hollow cavity.
- ❖ Inhale through your nose and imagine that your breath is flowing into your hollow head. Imagine the air whirling inside it, caressing the insides of your head.
- ❖ Exhale through your mouth. Imagine the air leaving your head and feel it flow out through your mouth.
- ❖ Take each body part in sequence from the top of your head to your toes and repeat this process. Each time, imagine the air flowing into and out of each different part of your body.
- ❖ Finally, take a few breaths while imagining the air flowing into your whole body in one go.

04. ***Anal breath***



This technique helps you achieve a strong sense of grounding and activates a part of the body that some of us give less attention to. It also helps strengthen the pelvic floor muscles which support your bladder and bowels and are important in sexual activity.

- ❖ You might find it easier to do this exercise while being on your knees and elbows. This allows you to notice more the contractions of your anus and makes the chest feel lighter. If this position is uncomfortable for you, sit on a chair with your back slightly arched so that you can feel the inside of your bum slightly more exposed.



- ❖ Clench your anus tightly while you start breathing in, imagining that the air is being sucked up by your anus and travelling through your mouth and torso, all the way up to your anus. Notice how you become aware of the inside of your pelvis in the process.
- ❖ When you exhale, relax your anus and let go of all pressure in your torso.

05. *Lion's breath*



This breathing technique energises you and relieves tension from the chest and face.

- ❖ Sit comfortably and press your palms down against your knees with your fingers spread wide.
- ❖ Inhale deeply through your nose and open your eyes wide. Also, open your mouth wide and stick out your tongue, bringing its tip down towards your chin. Pull back your scalp, ears and forehead.
- ❖ Keeping your face wide open, exhale through your mouth while you contract the muscles at the front of your throat and making a soft and long “aaaaaaa” sound.

06. *Fire breath*



This breathing technique activates your energy levels. Breathing is done rapidly, rhythmically and continuously. The inhale and the exhale are equal with no pause in between (approximately 2-3 breaths per second). It's always practised through the nostrils with the mouth

closed. The fire breath is powered by contractions of the solar plexus, the space just above your belly button. The chest stays relaxed and slightly lifted throughout the breathing cycle.

- ❖ Exhale through the nose by pulling the belly button inwards and upwards towards the spine. The upper abdominal muscles also pull inwards and upwards.
- ❖ Inhale by relaxing your abdomen completely and allowing air to be sucked in. Breathing in will happen as part of the relaxation process rather than through any effort of your own.

WARNING: The fire breath can cause light-headedness or make you hyperventilate. If you experience dizziness or faintness when you practise it, stop immediately. If you have lung problems, you should avoid the fire breath as it can make your problem worse.

07. *Chaotic breathing*

This breathing technique energises you and helps you release emotional blockages.

- ❖ Breathe in and out through your nose as fast and deep as possible.
- ❖ Repeat this in a non-rhythmic and chaotic pattern for a maximum of 10 minutes.
- ❖ You can also do this while you're blindfolded so that your focus is on your breathing only.

WARNING: Chaotic breathing can cause light-headedness or make you hyperventilate. If you experience dizziness or faintness when you practise it, stop immediately. If you have lung problems, you should avoid chaotic breathing as it can make your problem worse.

Scanning the body

Consciously scanning our body helps us to become aware of different sensations in our body rather than take them for granted. Focusing our attention on specific parts of our body improves our awareness of our body as a whole. The following is a simple exercise that you can practise.

08. Body scan



- ❖ Find a comfortable place and sit or lie down.
- ❖ Rest your arms beside you or on your lap.
- ❖ Close your eyes or look at a fixed point on the floor.
- ❖ Notice the first few breaths. Notice what the breath feels like as you inhale and exhale. Notice which parts of your nose, mouth, throat and lungs it comes into contact with.
- ❖ After a few breaths, bring your attention to your feet. Notice any sensations in them. Notice their volume from the inside. Try to feel the skin, the muscles, the tendons, the ligaments and the bones.
- ❖ Repeat the previous step while moving up your body: ankles, lower legs, knees, thighs, genitals and groin, bum, lower back, belly, chest, upper back, shoulders, upper arms, elbows, forearms, wrists, hands, neck, head and face.
- ❖ Finally, take a few more breaths and notice how your breath flows through your body as a whole.

Aware movement

Move your hand behind you, outside your field of vision. Now, focus your eyes on a spot in front of you. Without looking at your hand, use it to point at the spot you're looking at. Leaving your hand where it is, glance back at it. Is it pointing towards the spot you were looking at? Yes, it is! This is because our body has receptors that monitor our position in the space around us. Whether we're walking, sitting, standing or running, our body is constantly monitoring our movement even though we're not consciously aware of it.

By increasing our awareness of our movement as it's happening, we can connect to our body more deeply and be more present in it. To do this, it helps to slow down our movement and be aware of the minute sensations that are involved. The following are some exercises that can help you practise aware movement.

09. Hourly check on posture

- ❖ Set a timer for every hour.
- ❖ When the alarm goes off, bring your attention to your posture. Notice how you're holding yourself.
- ❖ Check how you can adjust your posture slightly to make it more comfortable.

10. Walking with awareness

- ❖ Slow down your walking. As you take your next step, notice how the sole of your foot pushes into the ground and how the ground pushes it back.
- ❖ Notice how you balance as you lift the other leg. Notice what it feels like to move your leg in space until it reaches the ground in front of you and the sensation of your foot as it pushes into the ground.
- ❖ Continue walking like this for a while.
- ❖ Finally, stand still for some time and take note of your sensations.
- ❖ You can repeat this exercise with any kind of movement.

11. Dancing with awareness

- ❖ Put on some music. The first few times you try this exercise, it might be more helpful to use music with a slower rhythm.
- ❖ Close your eyes. Start feeling the music and allow your body to slowly move freely with it. The aim is to move freely, not to dance in a particular way.
- ❖ Notice how your body feels when it's moving. Notice how every movement you make creates a different sensation in the rest of your body. Pay particular attention to how your hip and shoulder movements influence movement in the rest of your body.
- ❖ Finally, pause for a while and notice the sensations in your body.

Vocalising

As children, we were often told not to be so noisy, not to cry or not to make a fuss. We were taught to control ourselves and restrain our verbal expression. As a result, this demand to control ourselves might have got stored in our throat leading to a blockage in emotional expression. This might have led us to 'lose our voice' in front of others and not speaking up for ourselves.

Opening up the throat to allow freer emotional expression is a subtle process that can be accompanied by a strong outpouring of emotions. The following are a few exercises that can help you open up the throat area and reclaim your voice.

12. *Breathing from the back of my throat*



When we breathe, we often use the upper part of our throat. On the other hand, when we exhale, we relax the throat muscles and the windpipe narrows a bit. This exercise uses the lower back of the throat and opens up the windpipe throughout the whole breathing cycle. Use this exercise every time you feel emotionally tense, always checking in with the tension in your throat and widening the windpipe.

- ❖ Find a relaxed position.
- ❖ Focus on your throat structure. Notice and sense the muscles that hold your throat together, the ones that keep the airway open.
- ❖ Bring your attention to how the throat muscles change with every inhale and exhale. Be aware of the sensations in your throat in the same way you would be aware of the movement in your arms when you flex and relax them.
- ❖ With the next few inhales, relax the lower back part of your throat. Let the air flow through your nose or mouth and reach the very back of your throat, relaxing it as you do so. You will notice that the sound of your breathing changes and becomes similar to the sound you hear at a cave entrance.
- ❖ Focus now on your exhale and try to keep your throat as open as possible. Tense the throat muscles to keep the windpipe wide open while exhaling. You will again notice that you're making a similar sound to when you were inhaling.

- ❖ Now, combine the two steps above and keep the airway open during both the inhale and exhale for a few breaths.
- ❖ In the end, notice the sensations in your throat.

13. *Exhaling with sound*



We're all familiar with the moaning sound that often accompanies sex. It involves heavier breathing than usual as well as using the voice box. This is what creates the moan. The sound travels through the air and reaches our ears. However, it's also transmitted throughout our bone structure as a subtle vibration. We literally feel the sound! We can use this form of exhaling in other situations – it isn't only limited to sex! Accompanying our exhalation with sound allows us to sense our body more and free up emotional blockages.

- ❖ Find a place where you won't be disturbed.
- ❖ Start breathing normally, focusing on the sensation of the breath in your throat.
- ❖ Keep the mouth relaxed. Your lips will be partially parted, like when you sigh.
- ❖ Exhale through the mouth and, while doing so, start to progressively engage your vocal cords, making a humming sound.
- ❖ Explore how tilting your head at different angles influences how easy it is to produce that hum. Find the one that's easiest for you.
- ❖ Allow the humming to increase in volume. Breathe from the lower back part of your throat. Notice the vibrations in your throat and possibly other parts of the body.
- ❖ Continue exhaling while making sounds and engaging the deepest part of your windpipe as much as possible. You might find that you're also using the top part of your lungs to do so. The aim is not to shout or force air out but to give as much voice as possible to the air as it leaves your throat.

14. *Breathing out forcefully*

This exercise is about forcing air out of your lungs while giving it a voice. It's about giving yourself power. It's particularly useful if you tend to be withdrawn and not so confident.

- ❖ Find a place where you can make noise without restraining yourself, like a remote field, your car or next to a very busy road.
- ❖ Take a few breaths while drawing energy from the bottom of your belly, imagining that the energy is coming from your groin.
- ❖ Ensure that your throat is as open as possible and that you're breathing from the lower back part of your throat.
- ❖ Exhale forcefully in one go, adding sound to it (e.g. "Ahh!"). Increase the volume as much as you can. After each forced exhale, allow yourself to breathe normally a few times and then repeat. You can, of course, shout or scream, but always ensure that the energy is coming from the lower part of your torso through an open windpipe.
- ❖ In the end, notice the sensations in your body and what emotions came up in the process.

Touch

Our skin is covered with thousands of sensors that register different forms of touch. The sense of touch is essential for our emotional and psychological development. In fact, people who are deprived of touch when they're young can experience very serious mental health difficulties later on in life.

Touching can be done in diverse ways and we can experience the same kind of touch in different ways depending on the context. For example, if we're feeling irritated and someone caresses our skin, we'll probably feel annoyed even though the same touch from a lover would be arousing. Pain and pleasure can easily be mixed up depending on the situation, as diverse erotic contact teaches us – an arousing tickle for one is annoying for another!

Because it's so important, touch is also a main way in which we can connect to, and feel, our body rather than forget about it. The following are a few exercises to help improve your physical connection to your body.

15. *Touching an object*



We grasp things. We move our hands along their surface. And yet we often lose touch with the objects that we're actually touching, unless they cause us pain. We ignore the temperature, the texture, the surface of the objects we're holding, of our clothes, of the chair we're sitting on. This exercise aims at bringing your focus back to what you're sensing. As with other body-focused exercises, try slowing down your movement as this intensifies the sensations and increases your awareness of them and of what you're experiencing.

- ❖ Find a cushion and place it on your lap.
- ❖ Close your eyes and place your hand on the cushion.
- ❖ Gently move one of your fingers along the cushion very, very slowly. Notice its texture, its softness, its temperature. Feel its surface dragging along your skin.
- ❖ Increase or decrease the pressure of your touch and notice how the sensation changes. Try going faster or slower and, again, notice any changes in sensation.
- ❖ Explore it with other fingers. Use the palm and the back of your hand. Notice how different parts of your hand sense the cushion in a different way.
- ❖ You can also touch the cushion with your forearm and elbow, always moving slowly and noticing the same things.
- ❖ Finally, put both of your hands on your lap and, keeping your eyes closed, notice the sensations in the hand that you used to touch the cushion. Notice how it feels different to the other hand. You might notice that it feels a bit larger.
- ❖ You can repeat this exercise with different objects that have different textures, for example, a crumpled piece of paper, a stress ball or a hairbrush.

16. *Touching myself*



When we touch ourselves, we experience touch from two sources: from the part of our body that's touching and from the part of our body that's being touched. By slowing down and focusing on our sense of touch, we can distinguish between the two and heighten the

sensation. We also bring more awareness to our body. Maybe we can allow ourselves to venture to parts of our body that we don't usually touch or to use different ways of touching that we've learnt to avoid.

- ❖ Find a place where you won't be disturbed.
- ❖ Decide which part of your body you would like to explore and remove as much clothing as you feel comfortable with from that part of your body.
- ❖ Take some time to move your hands along that part of your body. Move your hands very slowly. Notice the sensation in your hand and the sensation in that part of your body. How does the temperature feel? What about the texture of your skin, its softness? See if there's any part that feels more pleasurable than others.
- ❖ Try to see if you can use different parts of your body to touch that same part of your body. Notice how it feels different to when you touched it using your hands. Always be aware of the part of your body that's touching and the part that's being touched.
- ❖ Try using different kinds of strokes on that part of your body: a gentle stroke with the fingertips, another softer one with the back of the nails. Try putting more pressure instead. How does it feel to increase the pressure while moving your nails along it, to pinch it softly or harder? What happens when you tap it lightly or harder? Which kind of stroke feels more pleasant for you?
- ❖ Finally, lie still and notice the sensations in the part of your body that you were exploring. What did you learn about it?

17. *Holding different parts of my body*



The skin holds us together, literally. By stimulating the sense of pressure in our skin, we can amplify the feeling of being held. This pressure heightens our awareness of the protective layer that lies between us and what's around us. When we feel overwhelmed or exposed, it can help to physically feel the boundary between ourselves and our surroundings.

- ❖ Sit comfortably on the floor or on a mat or mattress.
- ❖ Keep your eyes closed during the exercise.

- ❖ Take a few moments to connect to your breathing and be present in the place you're in at the moment.
- ❖ Using both of your hands, hold the tip of one of your feet. Increase the pressure to the point just before it starts feeling uncomfortable. Breathe into this sense of being held and notice how it feels to have that mass of your body in between your hands and to have that part of your body held tight.
- ❖ Move your hands to your heel and repeat the previous step. Repeat this process for all parts of your body. There's no need to rush. Just be present with every part you hold. If you don't have time to hold all parts of your body, focus only on some of them. It's better to be present only with some parts of your body than rushing through the exercise trying to touch the whole of your body. Remember to include your genitals and other erotic zones in the process.
- ❖ Finally, lie still for a while and take note of the sensations on your skin.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Conti is a highly qualified and experienced psychotherapist, trauma specialist, coach, counsellor and supervisor for psychosocial professionals.

Michael started off his education in Malta as a science teacher. He then moved to Italy where he worked in the social sector and later moved to France to complete his studies in philosophy. Following this, he read for a Master's degree in Integrative Counselling and Psychotherapy in the United Kingdom and later furthered his education with another Master's degree in Supervision for Psychosocial Professionals.

In his many years of experience, he has worked in different settings, including LGBTQIA+ organisations, schools, vocational colleges, emergency services and private practice. During his work as a deputy head of service at the London Fire Brigade (UK) he specialised in working with psychological trauma and trained as an EMDR therapist. Michael also undertook an education as a specialist in Somatic Sexuality (ICS) in Spain and is the founder of Orange Bodies, an initiative where he works with embodiment practice.

In addition, he has taught on Master's degree programmes, published in journals and delivered seminars, workshops and trainings to both professionals and organisations.