

# Cultivating Positive Body Awareness

## A brief introduction

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VERSION 1.2 (DRAFT)

The information you will read here is based on about 10 years of application in clinical practice, and will eventually be part of a larger introduction to self-resourcing, particularly aimed at preventing and reversing trauma.

To keep the document short, there is little explanation as to *why* I am suggesting the particular route described here. This is an issue, because if you understand *why* you're doing something, it becomes far more meaningful. So what you are reading is a stop-gap measure (whilst the much larger task of writing a complete book is in progress).

I strongly recommend that you do not attempt to deviate from the instructions, or add any knobs or bells, or confuse it with any meditation or mindfulness that you already practice.

Although this is provided online to be freely available, its main audience is patients who come to my clinic. Putting this material into practice is one the one hand potentially simple, and on the other hand less straightforward than might appear – for two reasons. One is that the cultural messages we are steeped in are contradictory to how the body-mind actually works. I have applied this material for well over a decade, some parts for well over two decades. I can honestly say that it took me many years of sustained effort to break through cultural programming and not be paying partial lip service to its basic principles. So for this reason alone, the material is really meant to be used ***with regular guidance***. Secondly, although there are many self-help books out there, and our culture encourages self-motivation and self-healing, true resilience is not to be found in pure self-reliance. Some internationally respected resilience experts have (only half-jokingly) called for self-help books to be burned. A good article on this topic can be found at <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-put-down-the-self-help-books-resilience-is-not-a-diy-endeavour/>. I don't agree with its conclusion that external factors are more important than individual thinking, but with all that extraneous political and social and environmental noise, finding peace inside is certainly less easy than it should be.



## The importance of a positive relationship with the body

Culturally, we are implicitly instructed to ignore our bodies unless something goes wrong, and then pay attention to the “problem” so that we can “solve it”. This may work as a strategy when things are going more or less OK. But it definitely does not work as a long term strategy, for many reasons.

There are several feedback loops in the brain that are designed to give us critical survival information on a) things that we want more of, and (b) things that we wish to avoid. To this end, the sensory system is programmable through

- i. how we use our attention / what we place it on, and
- ii. what mental-emotional state we happen to be in.

Everything that can be sensed is given a set of flags that determine what priority it will be given in future – i.e. the degree to which our brain will automatically send our senses and awareness towards it, and what “volume” the sensory control knob is turned to.

This programming is based on placing “significance flags” on anything that we might sense... Whatever we place our attention on most gets more flags. And if we are in mental-emotional states that define a survival-related topic, then a lot more flags are attached.

The two basic mental-emotional states that produce the greatest number of flags are :

1. **Fear / anxiety / disgust / repulsion** (related to things that we wish to avoid – i.e. emotions that occur when our safety is threatened, and that require a heightened response to external threats).
2. **Curiosity / Gratitude / Appreciation / Enjoyment** (related to things we want more of – i.e. these emotions tell us that not only is our environment safe from immediate threat, but that it provides things that nourish and sustain us – physically, emotionally and/or spiritually).

Our problem-solving culture tells us that we have to pay attention to the biggest noise. And we are not generally trained how to *choose* where we place our attention. Therefore, our attention gets drawn frequently towards survival threats – thereby placing more flags and (by default) telling our sensory system that we do not live in a safe world. Obviously, a feeling of

distress will place more flags than a neutral emotion. This sets up a feedback loop, whereby the brain directs our attention towards the potential dangers more often, and every time that we obey this, more flags are placed. After a while, the sensory control centre starts to turn up the volume. Over time the brain may even make new neural connections or even increase the number of nerve fibers (because if the amount of information traffic along these nerves).

It is easy to see how, over time, if the sensory feedback loop is not properly managed, this can escalate. A safe place can start to look (and feel) very dangerous. The next stage is that our body-mind also has to get on with life, and cannot stay in perpetual threat-hyperarousal. We need to eat, drink, defecate, and deal with “normal” events. So this ambivalence creates a numbness – we switch off conscious awareness of the danger messages coming from the body – but these are still being produced, and we are still unwittingly engaged in the survival feedback loop.

What has been described above is an escalation caused by the behaviour and use of mind and senses that our culture and society tend to encourage. It is important to learn a new way of using the brain which does not enter a catastrophic feedback loop. The end result is a society that is stressed for no reason – resulting in a poor quality of inter-human relations, overwhelm, numbness (which then requires greater and greater sensory stimulation). The mental overload results in a tendency to enter addictive patterns. Alcohol, food, drugs, or cellphones and social media – it’s all the same. Addictions to sex, work, emotionally unsatisfying relationships or violence can also come about from this. All of these addictions are just ways to numb out in response to all the survival/danger/threat-response messages that our body is sending us all the time, mainly because we have unwittingly drawn our primitive (survival-based) nervous system into a feedback loop.

**Furthermore, a constant threat-response state in the body also changes the functions of the heart and lungs, the digestive system, and (most importantly) the immune system.**

The body no longer deals with illnesses properly because it is always putting them away “to be dealt with later”, because it is more interested in the immediate (non-existent) threats that it thinks surround it. Long term illness arises because the body is forced to work in a survival-response state – which is NOT a physiologically efficient or adaptive state. This has a negative impact on the ability of the body to self-heal, and may even directly trigger physical

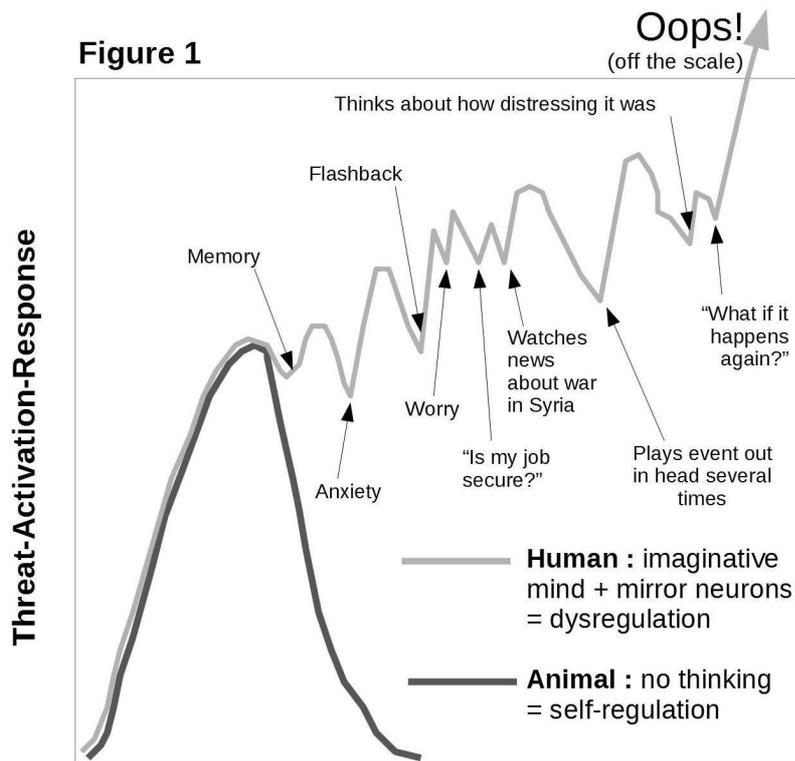
illnesses (“somatisations”).

**So the ill-health that is seen as “normal” on our society (especially as people get older) is caused by an incorrect relationship between the conscious mind and the body – and by the fact that the mind is not doing its job of conveying a sense of safety to the animal body. In fact, the body when not in a survival threat-response state has a massively greater self-healing capacity than is commonly attributed to it in our medicalised culture.**

Reversing the cycle described above (and therefore increasing the capacity for health), requires a different relationships with the body. The odd thing about self-awareness is that it is a very personal thing. Having talked with many people about internal awareness (“interoception”) for many years, I can confidently say that there are almost as many different ways of being self-aware as there are people in the world. So I am also aware that some people reading this will already be doing what I suggest, and all that is required is that they exercise a small amount of extra consciousness. And some people will read this and it be so far from their sense of reality that they will wonder what kind of drugs I have been taking. Most people will be somewhere in between these two extremes and so should find the following exercises useful.

## **Self-regulation in a stressful world**

The Brain and senses do not just work on their own with no maintenance. As conscious “drivers” of this vehicle we call a body, one important task we have is to help our primitive brain know whether we are safe or not. The fact that we can think and have an imagination has created the possibility for strong destructive feedback loops to be set up – in a way that animals do not experience. An animal when presented with pain or trauma will react - and then if given a chance and not interfered with – will self-regulate. The only difference between humans and animals - is that we think and imagine and tell ourselves stories. The primitive brain does not understand the difference between these stories and the real thing.



The main thing that we do wrong when we use our mind and senses is that we focus on what is “the problem”. This is a cultural thing, because there are some cultures – e.g. several tribes who live in the arctic tundra – who do not experience central sensitisation. And physical illness is also uncommon.

*So all this culturally-driven problem solving - is a problem.*

In short, the “safety meter” in your brain notices if you are constantly focussed on problems and not spending much time paying attention to what is good in life. If the overall balance is towards problems, this is interpreted in the deep, primitive brain as living in a very dangerous environment – which changes how the senses work, and also makes fundamental changes to the immune system and various other important parts of your physiology.

Ideally, to be self-consistent, I would write this guide in a way that does not even mention “the problem”. However, in that kind of language it would not be understood in anything like the kind of depth necessary to have any effect.

**There are five simple principles that you need to know :**

1. Whatever you focus on or place your attention on will get bigger – via sensory and neurological feedback loops
2. You have a **choice** as to where you put your attention – so you do not have to allow the biggest noise to call you all the time
3. You also have a certain amount of choice as to the mental emotional state that you experience. Emotions cannot be “made up”, but if they happen, you can choose how much priority to give them, and most importantly, how much **Meaning** to give them.
4. “Good” flags can be set by deliberately using the mental-emotional range **Curiosity / Gratitude / Appreciation**, and the more “good” flags are set, the less priority the “bad” ones will have.
5. Your body is a friend, and as a friend, it needs certain attention to cultivate that friendship. This friendship is cultivated by being interested in the body (i.e. feeling what it feels like inside) and having some compassion for the body.

If pain becomes a regular feature of life, many people will start to think of the body as being the enemy, and/or of needing fixing. In reality, the body can never be the enemy – its biological imperative is to survive and to work as efficiently as possible. And it contains inside itself the solutions to most of its ailments.

## Basic principles

From these basic principles (above), the following “life-rules” can be inferred – as instructions for using your senses and your attention :

- Your body needs to be appreciated. Shift your awareness to it regularly – and especially to the sensations that tell you that you are alive and healthy. (more on this later)
- Your job is to do “reality checks” for your primitive brain... If your body or mind get over-reactive to something, then it's important to do a reality check and say “just how bad is this, on the grand scale of things?” If the answer is “Not that bad”, then you know that you're not in immediate danger of annihilation – there is nothing out there that is going to eat you in the next 10 minutes – so why not refocus and find something to be aware of that brings you a feeling of appreciation and pleasure? Again, some part of the body that feels to be happy being here and now (and is not reacting to the world) – is a good place to place your awareness.
- If there really is a problem, then do something about it ASAP, so it's not there – or recognise that it's not something that you can do anything about, and refocus.
- Basically – train yourself to be appreciative of the world around you and appreciative of your body.

## Notes on appreciation

Everyone knows what that glow of appreciation is when you are in the presence of something wonderful. A clear sky, or an ancient tree, or a beautiful flower, or a baby that is just starting to crawl. Maybe none of these give you a warm glow inside, but you can remember a time or situation or place when you did feel it – and remember what it was that prompted that glow... This glow is “Appreciation”. If you inspect it carefully you'll find that it also contains a subtle kind of gratitude. Not the kind of gratitude that owes something in return or that makes you feel unworthy, or regret that it might not last long – but rather a feeling that there is nothing owed – just that it is wonderful this (whatever it is) is in the world and you are able to experience it for a few moments.

The more things that you can find to appreciate in your life and then spend some time with the feeling of appreciation, the more stable your nervous system will become. It's the small everyday things that make the most difference, because we can be constantly reminded of their presence throughout the day.

Appreciation is a **feeling** as well as a frame of mind. And as all feelings, there are somatic (internal body) sensations that can be felt that go with it. Being positively interested in the somatic sensations of appreciation (“*where am I feeling that and exactly what am I feeling?*”) creates a very useful feedback loop which helps to regulate the body-mind.

## Notes on what a healthy and alive body feels like

Physical “health” is a physical experience. It is NOT a “comfortably numb” feeling – and neither is it a feeling of something not being quite right. In between these two extremes of “absence” and “loud noise”, there is a middle ground of sensation in the body that says “here I am and I'm alive, and everything is OK”. **So when focussing on health, remember to filter out these two extremes when you start to be aware of your body.**

If you find a part of your body that is numb, blank, absent, dizzy, or disconnected, then

- recognise that numb, blank, absent, dizzy are sensations in their own right – so you don't need to look any further!
- acknowledge it (because it's your body),
- wish it the best from your heart (as best you can), and then
- say to yourself “what else is there?”

*So you can let go of this part of the body, and look elsewhere in your body to find sensations of health.*

Similarly, if you find a loud noise – pain – then

- acknowledge it (because it's your body),
- wish it the best from your heart (as best you can),
- check – do I need to do something about this right now? - if you do, then DO IT! If not, or if you cannot do anything about the pain right at this moment, then
- be a little curious – where is it, what does it feel like – but only spend a few seconds doing this - then
- say to yourself “what else is there?”

*So you can let go of this part of the body, and look elsewhere in your body to find sensations of health.*

**Once you filter out the two extremes, you are left with all the sensations that say “*I am here now, I’m alive, I’m healthy and the world is OK*”.**

These might just be contact sensations (pressure, warmth, texture of surfaces, space and air round your face, solidity and texture of whatever is supporting you, sensations of clothing, etc). Or they might be very physical sensations – muscle texture, or blood, or pulsing, or the shape and position of bony joints, or the various sensations of teeth and softness inside your mouth (etc). Or they might be more subtle sensations – tingly, fizzy, electric, buzzy, airy, cottonwooly presences (etc). Or maybe just a sense of being energised, and having the capacity to move. There are many, many possibilities. Health also tends to feel light more than heavy, and move-able rather than excessively dense and rigid.

## **Notes on the importance of depth of experience**

If you have a few minutes, it is well worth deepening your awareness of healthy sensations. The more you can turn on your curiosity and explore the “where” (in 3 dimensions) and the “what” of healthy sensations to get more and more detail, the deeper this “message” goes into the corners and depths of the primitive brain, and the more positive effect it has on your health.

*The whole point of the exercises I describe here is that we are deepening the communication between your conscious mind and the primitive parts of your brain that run your physiology. It is that high quality communication that does the work. So this is NOT about changing anything by force – rather, we provide new information and your body decides how it is going to use that information.*

## Notes on emotions

Emotions are also physical sensations – they are not just thoughts. So appreciation is a “positive” emotion, just as curiosity is a positive mental state. When we feel appreciation or become genuinely curious about the world, then the message that is detected by our primitive brain - is that *we are safe*.

Emotions are supposed to move freely through our body and awareness, and then go, once their message has been “heard”. This is how a baby or a child or an animal will handle emotions – they feel them 100%, and then the emotion (like all other sensations in the body) eventually changes. Emotions are also sensations. Every emotion has a very specific set of sensations that occur in very specific parts of the body... always it is several parts of the body, and always there is quite a complex set of changes in sensation.

So emotions may be experienced as a mental-emotional reaction, in which case we are usually taken over by the emotion, and we are 100% caught up in the *meaning* that the emotion conveys to us. It is also possible to perceive emotion as a set of sensations – in which case it is far easier to not be taken over by the emotion, and also it is much easier to carry out a reality check to test whether the emotion is in proportion to what is happening. Obviously this is very complex when we are in a social interaction – but if we are alone, the situation is far simpler, and it is easier to unpick the emotion by observing its somatic detail. Then we have a choice of whether to react or not to the emotion. And we also have a choice as to whether to pay it attention.

If (e.g.) anxiety is being felt, then forget the mental storyline, and experience what it feels like in your body. Smile at it. Welcome it. Acknowledge it, and notice if it is a real and proportionate response to what is happening around you. If it is – then the anxiety was there for a purpose – to bring your attention to danger. If it is not proportionate to your surroundings, then what you are feeling is a memory, in which case, just ask “what else is there? ... where in my body am I NOT feeling this?”

You will find that there are parts of your body that are not anxious at all. In this way, it is possible to manage emotions, so that the body and deeper parts of the brain are not receiving a message that you are in immediate danger of death. Safety is always relative, and as long as we are relatively safe, then life can go on. If we let our primitive survival alarms know that we are safe enough, then they will become calm, and well calibrated to reality.

If for some unfortunate reason you end up in pain through an injury or illness – if you apply the above rules, then the pain will not escalate into central sensitisation. And it is far more likely that (as a result of applying those rules) your body will be more able to heal itself.

## Notes on the breath

Your breath can be a useful way to help find sensory and physiological stability and a general awareness of safety. If you are already quite well emotionally resourced, and feel generally safe, then it is possible to use the breath. If there is anxiety, then the breath tends to become short and the lungs tend to only inhale and exhale at the top or bottom. Then an increasing reservoir of carbon dioxide builds up - which then creates a state of physiological anxiety! This is yet another feedback loop in the body.

So using the breath : first, focus on achieving a very deep exhalation and let your body breathe itself on the inhalation. Repeating this several times, and then after about 10 breaths “helping” the inhalation to be full for about 3 breaths will help to clear stagnant carbon dioxide, and replenish the lungs with oxygen. This can produce a sense of energised calmness. The effect can be increased if you follow this clearing-out with a couple of minutes of 10 second breath cycles. i.e. 10 seconds = 4 seconds out, 1 second pause, 4 seconds in, 1 second pause.

Do NOT attempt to use the breath if you are feeling very anxious, or if your breathing is permanently restricted to the top of the lungs. If you are not sure about either of these, better not to bother counting the breath at all.

But it is still always useful to exhale long and deeply to clear out any stagnant air.

## Notes on Distraction

Many people mistake the above instructions (and the ones below) as distraction. This is not distraction – though distraction is *also* a useful tool in managing pain. In distraction we attempt to avoid something that we do not like. This can create dissociation if the avoidance is done in any forceful or fearful way.

So the filtering process described above is a very gentle decision that **“Yes – I am aware of that, and I simply choose to place my attention elsewhere”**.

If any level of force is used in this decision, or there is a fear or dislike of what has been sensed, then a polarity is set up in the body-mind, and this polarity tends to lock the dissociation in – rather than releasing it. Since the primitive brain is very “forgiving”, it is perfectly OK to distract or wilfully or even forcefully place your attention elsewhere, or deliberately (temporarily) increase numbness because that is more comfortable. This is always a useful pain management technique.

***But NOT when doing the exercises described here!***

## **A resilience-building mindfulness sequence**

This is an adaptation of “mindfulness” and Gendlin’s “Focussing” - with a filter applied to ensure that health is deliberately cultivated. This is a kind of anti-therapy, because it brings about health by growing the health that is already there... whereas most therapy attempts to fix the problems by poking them. There is room for both approaches – but the “growing health” approach is kinder, safer, and more efficient in most circumstances. And it is a way of correctly using the body-mind relationship that is hardwired in our nervous system.

### **1. Preparation, settling in**

Start by being aware of the room around you with your eyes. Become curious about little details that are of interest – pictures, windows, reflections of light – whatever gives you some small sense of appreciation.

Decide where you want to be in the room, and get yourself as comfortable as possible. Now look round and check that the room is safe. This might sound a little OTT, but it is necessary to deliberately check that you are safe. Spend a few minutes just checking out the corners, getting a sense of where you really want to be so that you feel safest and most supported. Use your head and neck – deliberately moving your head slowly to scan the room.

Repeat the first step - being visually aware of the room around you. Become curious about little details that are of interest – pictures, windows, reflections of light – whatever gives you some small sense of appreciation.

Now place your attention on your body, and say “Here we all are, together – we are safe”. Feel if your body responds. It may not change at all, but it might “hear” what you have just said, and relax in some small way, or become more energised. If some part of your body does respond, then smile at it internally.

### **2. Core observe-response sequence**

What we have just carried out is a standard communication pattern :

Aware – Gesture – Response – Acknowledgement

This pattern will be repeated time and time again...

- **Aware** – we become aware of the general state of the body-mind, not taking much time – it's just “*this is how I feel at the moment in a very general way*” - with some emphasis on healthy sensations. A one-or-two-second check-in to the mental and emotional and physical status-quo.
- **Gesture** – we send a message to the body : there are many ways to do this – through awareness, through movement, through accessing a memory, etc.
- **Response** – we become aware of how the body responds, if at all. It might not respond – that's OK. It is important to be honest (so that you do not make things up) and at the same time open minded (so you do not doubt your impressions). Over time the body will begin to respond - by sensations changing when you give it some information. If you feel no response, this is a very good reason to persist.
- **Acknowledgment** – If there is any kind of response to the gesture we have just made, we acknowledge the body's response... This deepens the quality and depth of communication (between your mind and the body's physiology) that has just occurred.

***The whole point of all of this is to communicate that you are safe - as deeply as possible into the physiology of the body***, so that the nervous system has a “reality check”, and then recalibrates itself to the safety of your real world. It is not possible to just say “I am safe” - that message has to be accompanied by real emotions that confirm this, and real points of sensory attention that also confirm it. This cannot be done in a disturbed, over-busy or open public space, because so far as the primitive alarms of your brain are concerned, these are not particularly safe places.

### **3. Settling deeper into the body**

Now change your curious focus to the sounds around you... Notice the normality of these sounds, identify them one at a time. Be also aware of the space around you, again consciously noticing the safety of the soundscape you are in. Your body also hears through the skin – particularly deep vibratory sounds – and with this part of the hearing it is also possible to have a sense of the space around you. Notice whether there is a somatic response to these sounds – does the body like them or recoil, or it is just neutral?

Now place your attention on your body, and say **“Here we all are, together – we are safe”**. Feel if your body responds. It may not change at all, but it might “hear” what you have just said, and relax in some small way, or become more energised. If some part of your body does respond, then smile at it internally.

Coming in a little further – this time to the sensations that tell you that you are in physical contact with the chair, clothes, etc and most importantly that your body is physically held and supported and is warm enough. Include the movement of your chest as you breathe, and any sense of warm comfort.

Now place your attention on all the “healthy” sensations you have so far – superficial ones, plus any parts of you that feel warm or have responded to you so far by relaxing. Smile at all of them (but nowhere else) and say **“Here we all are, together – we are safe. Thankyou”**.

Feel if your body responds. If some part of your body does respond, then smile at it internally.

Now we move a little deeper .. and at this point you can begin to scan your body systematically, remembering to apply the filtering method... Usually we might start at the feet and work up, but the choice is entirely yours. In cases of pain it is best, if possible, to start at the opposite end of the body. So moving one piece at a time, the entire body is scanned using the gesture-response sequence described above. This whole-body scan can take anything from a couple of minutes through to over an hour, depending on how much anatomical detail you choose to go into.

If you find a part of your body that is numb, blank, absent, dizzy, or disconnected, then

- acknowledge it (because it's your body),
- wish it the best from your heart (as best you can), and then
- compassionately say to yourself **“what else is there?”**

*So you can gently let go of this part of the body, and go elsewhere to find sensations of health. Remember that blank, numb and absent are sensations in their own right – there is no need to look any further.*

Similarly, if you find a “loud noise” – pain – then

- acknowledge it (because it's your body),
- wish it the best from your heart (as best you can),
- check – do I need to do something about this right now? - if you do, then DO IT! If not, or if you cannot do anything about the pain right at this moment, then
- be a little curious (*where is it, what does it feel like?*) – but only spend a few seconds doing this - then
- compassionately say to yourself **“what else is there?”**

*So you can gently let go of this part of the body, and go elsewhere to find sensations of health.*

**If these two extremes are filtered out *without being frightened of them or being forceful in any way*, then what is left are sensations of health.**

Now place your attention on all the “healthy” sensations you have so far – superficial ones, plus any healthy internal sensations, plus parts of you that feel warm or have responded to you so far by relaxing. Smile at all of them (but nowhere else) and say **“Here we all are, together – we are safe. Thankyou”**.

Feel if your body responds. If some part of your body does respond, then smile at it internally. If some part of your body feels like it has connected and become available (when previously it was blank) then smile at it internally and say *“Welcome home”*.

Continue to spend a few minutes becoming more curious about where ONLY the sensations of health are in your body.

Now come back out slowly through the senses – being aware of the support/contact, the sounds, and then looking at the room...

If you keep your attention clearly directed towards sensations in the middle zone of health, then at the end of the exercise you will most likely feel softer, more relaxed, probably also more energised, and pain levels may have reduced.

#### **4. Important note for meditators**

If you have any mindfulness or meditation experience, be aware that a sharpened awareness is a very two-edged sword if there is pain (or its opposite, numbness). In which case you must take particular care to stay in the middle zone I describe by not spending too long questioning what you are aware of when carrying out the filtering exercise. If you stay in numbness or pain saying “*do I filter this or not?*” or “*I can stay with this even though it is pain*” or “*there is no sensation but what if I look a little deeper?*” - this is a deviation from my instructions (and I recommend that you do not deviate). Numbness, blankness and absence are sensations in their own right – so if you feel any of them, you *have* felt a sensation, and it is good to move on to something else.

#### **5. Making it a daily practice**

Repeat this exercise at least once every day – and keep “welcoming home”, acknowledging and appreciating any part of your body that becomes more alive or more connected (not numb) or which is no longer in pain.

This is a basic-level foundation, and can have remarkable effects if practised carefully and compassionately. To this foundation, it is possible to add various extra tweaks that can further deepen its effect, and I will eventually be teaching these in an online seminar.

It is possible to use this sequence as a basic check-in, and just spend a minute or so becoming more centred. Or you could spend well over an hour moving very slowly and methodically through the whole body, constantly returning to sensations of health and observing what happens when you observe them with curiosity and appreciation for any extended period of time.

The exercise is designed to communicate at a cellular/tissue level, so it takes about 20-40 seconds for your body to start to respond deeply to the new information you are providing it, and up to couple of minutes for that to integrate into a previously disconnected part of the body. Once tissues are reconnected, communication time is almost instantaneous, and you will then be aware of an increase in body energy as soon as you place attention on it.