

*Excerpt of pages from Background Reading for Well Now course facilitators (entry level). I hope you can use the ideas but please respect copyright consent and don't photocopy etc.*

## Session Six

Benefits of physical activity can be organized as core aspects that are inter-related. I stopped at twenty, there are more.

1. Cardiovascular fitness (heart, lungs and circulation)
2. Muscular strength
3. Flexibility
4. Improved breathing
5. Mental wellbeing (reduced depression, sense of purpose) and coping with trauma symptoms
6. Social engagement, belonging, reciprocity
7. Metabolic fitness (blood pressure, cholesterol, insulin resistance)
8. Bone strength and healthy joints
9. Body confidence
10. Improved sleep
11. More pleasurable sex
12. Digestive health
13. Improved immunity
14. Enhanced body attunement including sensitivity to appetite
15. Benefit from inter-connection with non-human nature if in fresh air and green spaces
16. Enhanced feelings of zest, vitality
17. Falls prevention
18. Pain management
19. Reduced risk of some diseases (breast and colon cancer, T2D, stroke), disease management and rehabilitation
20. Enhanced memory and cognition



### Sample useful links:

<https://averagejoecyclist.com/guide-for-fat-cyclists/>

[Choosing a bike, a guide for fat cyclists video](#)

## Active Living and Body Awareness

### Discussion

**Body awareness** or **tuning in**, or **minding the body**, is what we use when we listen to body signals like hunger, and can also be applied to activity, and other body-mind practices that can help us take care of ourselves.

A diet mentality approach treats the body as machine with its emphasis on measuring and setting external targets. It can often encourage a competitive attitude where we think of ourselves mostly as we compare to others, rather than encouraging us to inhabit our bodies. I'm not suggesting there's anything wrong with competition (I love a hilly cross country race as much as the next person – in fact, oddly enough, usually more than the next person!), it can be fun to push ourselves. But when our sole drive is to do more, faster, for longer, to push harder, stretch further, without paying attention to how we feel except to over-ride pain, then it's not really sustainable self-care we're talking about. (That said, remember, sometimes self-care means surviving – what is 'over exercising' in a frame of longevity, might be the thing that's helping us survive long enough to get to this future place where we have the luxury of not battling trauma symptoms, confusion and self-loathing every day.) There's a difference between really striding out and pushing ourselves because it's exhilarating and we feel great, and trying to push ourselves because we think we should when in fact we feel lousy and then feeling like we haven't done enough because we didn't keep to the schedule that week.

Schedules and training logs can be useful for us to get an idea of what works best for us: but make sure they serve you, and not the other way round. As above, remember that some people will use exercise as a way of coping with distress and painful emotions. For the time being this is the best they can do, and so it's adaptive self-care – in the same way as when we use food to cope with emotions because we're not able to do anything else at the time. So it's important that people don't pick up a sense you're judging anyone for doing 'excess' exercise, but rather highlighting the differences between a caring, fun, and a troubled approach.

A Well Now approach to wellbeing draws us back to 'how do I feel? How will I feel if ....?', helping us establish links between our actions and wellbeing that are meaningful to us at a particular time. Two things to remember: how we feel is socially constructed. And be careful not to imply judgment : some people may prefer a structured, competitive approach and we can't know what's in it for them , or what the costs of experimenting would be for them right now. Explore people's choices with them, if this is what they want, without any agenda of persuading them to change.

We have seen how Well Now practice encourages us to use our body knowledge. This practice involves registering and responding to (not always synonymous with 'acting on') emotions, gut instinct, body signals and feelings and can be described as body awareness. Taken together the practices that come under the umbrella of body awareness or Minding

the Body help us recognize, name, and make sense of what's going on for us. This can be likened to a process of re-parenting the self\*.

Using breathing exercises throughout the sessions can help people develop greater emotional awareness and connection.

Being able to identify and manage emotions in turn leads to clearer cognition, and a feeling of improved ability to make choices. Hand in hand with this greater capacity for self-regulation and agency is an enhanced capacity for self-care, and connection.

In mainstream medicine the benefits of body awareness for overall wellbeing are known but they are usually only taught to people experiencing particular distress, such as pain or depression, or where stress reduction is known to be helpful, such as with cardiac rehabilitation patients and people quitting smoking. However, the benefits of really being aware of being in the body can be felt by everyone and can be practiced on a day-to-day basis as mindfulness and relaxation (or visualization). Some types of exercise such as yoga, tai chi and chi kung can also help.

This might be a good place to mention cultural respect/appropriation.

\* Please be mindful of the fact that people who have a history of trauma may find the return to the bodyself offered via tuning in/ body awareness potentially both especially challenging and especially liberating.

Body awareness, and tuning in, has links with body knowledge and self-trust. Over time, the practice of body awareness, especially when it includes tuning in/focus/mindfulness, can contribute to an improved sense of wellbeing and trust in our bodies: if we trust ourselves we relate to the world in a more grounded way, we are more in touch with our own agency (our ability to act) and can more readily protect ourselves from damaging outside influences - insults and put downs - and move towards growth-fostering relationships. This doesn't

make insults ok of course, but it does gives us more choice to change our response and safeguard ourselves.

In the language of public health, having a sense of agency in our responses to adverse events favourably shapes our **'life world'**. This is good news for our day-to-day resilience and happiness, and it also impact the metabolic and inflammatory consequences of living with stress to improve our health outcomes.



In expanding body awareness beyond the conventional parameters of 'fitness' or 'physical activity', a Well Now approach encourages us to consider the range of ways we might come to feel at more peace in our bodies and learn to appreciate and enjoy our embodiment.

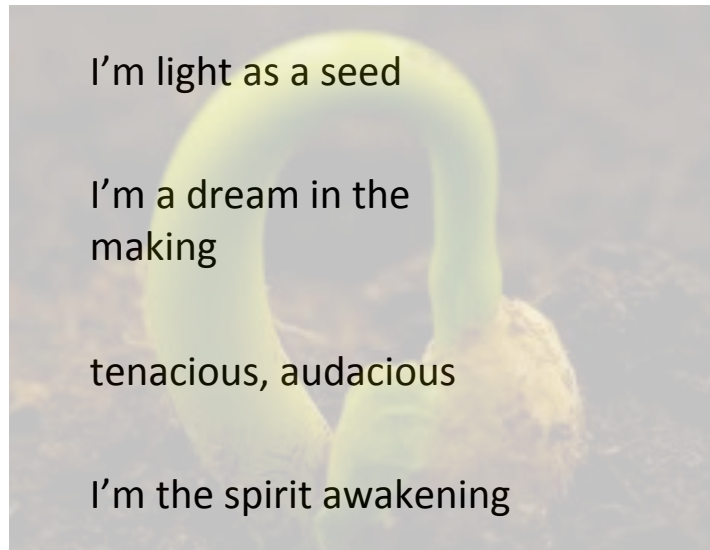
The idea of activity optimizing our everyday wellbeing, rather than being focused on 'keeping fit', opens up dimensions of embodiment that can fall to the wayside in more instrumental approaches to activity. For example, let's say the person with limited mobility also suffers from chronic pain. As well as any benefit from being

more active, there are also strategies for tuning in to the body that can help with pain management and sleep. Breathing and relaxation exercises, and some forms of martial arts, can help people manage stress and develop emotional connection and awareness.

So the idea of 'minding the body' can help us get some distance from thinking of our bodies – and thus ourselves – as machines to kept in working order. It includes physical activity, but it doesn't stop there. It also has room for relaxation and related practices, plus pampering and sensual experiences. This could include through massage, burning aromatherapy oils and other sensual experiences, singing, being in the open air, sexuality, laughter.

But we don't need to stop there either – how about embodiment as self-expression and creativity, such as in singing, performance and dance? And it allows for emotional, social and wider non-human connections. The experience of, and human health benefits from, walking a mile down a busy road are very different from those that result from walking in green spaces: expanding how we think of our embodiment helps us bring this bigger picture into view and get out of the thinking-trap where a mile walk amounts to x number of steps and x calories burned. It's also an opportunity to think of human health as interconnected with non-human health – maybe the benefits of connecting with trees aren't just one-way in the moment? What about any enduring wider impact on collective wellbeing as more ecological awareness shifts how we relate to other people as well as the non-human world? This provides room for many ways of knowing, including those dismissed by western science and evidence-based practice.

Alongside the health-enhancing benefits of listening to our bodies, there are other ways to tap in on 'feel good factors' as we'll now see.



## The Body Politic – Wellbeing in society

### Reciprocity

From *reciprocal*, this means helping each other out as a two way exchange, so being able to do things for others as well as receive help from others. Also known as 'mutual aid'. It's more about an attitude than an account sheet, so if you help me move house I might reciprocate when you move house, or maybe I invite you round for a cup of tea because that's what I can manage. It's about knowing we're in relationships where we are valued and can show we value others.

### Sense of belonging and sense of community -

In a culture that values independence, it's easy to overlook the fact that our survival and ability to thrive depend on interrelationships. A sense of belonging is a recognised concept in mental health, and also impacts physical health:

A feeling of belonging to a country, region, and local community can influence people's sense of identity and the extent to which they participate in society. Generally, a strong sense of belonging is positively associated with better self-reported physical and mental health. A strong sense of belonging also contributes to individual and community well-being. <http://www4.hrsdc.gc.ca/.3ndic.1t.4r@-eng.jsp?iid=71>

Of course, we need to be mindful of values. As someone's strong sense of belonging to a violent group can improve their wellbeing, and harm someone else.

### Spirituality

For many people, but not all, this includes religious beliefs. What does it mean for you, for the people in your groups? Does anyone have any spiritual practices? For some people this can be being out in (non human) nature.

## Trust

The ability of low social support to predict all-cause mortality long been recognised.

- 'lower levels of social trust were associated with higher rates of most major causes of death, including coronary heart disease, malignant neoplasms, strokes ... and infant mortality' *Kawachi in Community Action for Mental Health 1997 HEA*

## Social Capital

The benefits of personal and community relationships on health are captured by the term 'social capital'. By definition social capital refers to relationships between people and cannot be an individual attribute. There is an accessible introduction to social capital here: <http://www.nice.org.uk/niceMedia/documents/CHB21-social-capital.pdf>

## The politics of knowledge: blood pressure

For a comprehensive introduction to the politics of health see : <http://www.pohg.org.uk/>  
This includes a short document on the politics of hypertension on the publications page.

## Status Syndrome

Particular groups of people have much worse health than would be expected on the basis of their genetics, lifestyle, income and other related factors. Marmot's work has led the way in showing the differences come about because of the way people are treated in society. If you are treated as a second class citizen your health will suffer as a result when compared to someone with similar health behaviours, genetics and income who is treated with more respect. The term 'status syndrome' is used to describe the importance of relationships and context accounting for avoidable differential health outcomes.

Recommended reading – article by Michael Marmot on Status Syndrome:

[http://www.sph.umich.edu/sep/downloads/Mamot\\_Status\\_Syndrome\\_challenge\\_to\\_Medicine.pdf](http://www.sph.umich.edu/sep/downloads/Mamot_Status_Syndrome_challenge_to_Medicine.pdf)

See top ten tips for health from a social model here:

<http://www.bris.ac.uk/poverty/healthinequalities.html>