

Principles of Becoming Safely Embodied

There are some principles underlying the Becoming Safely Embodied Skills that I want to introduce you to.

Community/Relationship

Over the years I continue to see the important value of connection and relationship. So much trauma happens/happened when people are kept secluded from each other or don't feel safe to interact. Finding safe ways to be in relationship is one of the key pieces of the Becoming Safely Embodied Skills.

Coming out of isolation and separation is, in and of itself, healing. Group experiences that are built on safety and connection are inspiring in part because a larger wisdom emerges. When you practice with others who have similar backgrounds, you discover you are not alone. You'll experience kinship.

One of the hardest things for me to give up in presenting this digital version of the Becoming Safely Embodied™ Skills is letting go of the experiences that happen in a live group. I had to balance out people not always having a facilitated group near them with offering the skills to as many people as possible.

Since we're not doing this Becoming Safely Embodied™ Course as a formal group together you might think there aren't ways to share yourself. Yet, take a moment to explore ways you could engage with the material as fully as you can.

It's important to feel safe and comfortable.

This comes about when you are with people who are receptive, nurturing, caring, considerate, and willing to let you find your way and keep loving you as you learn from the small mistakes you'll inevitably make.

You might have family or friends that fill that need. If so, wonderful! I'm very glad for you. Many people don't. Or haven't learned to cultivate relationships so they are safe. If you don't feel you have safe connections watch any tendency of the mind to swing you into despair or negative thinking that there's something wrong with you because you don't have this.

You can learn to the skill of cultivating relationships.

Twelve step programs as an easy – and free – way to begin practicing being with others in a safe, contained way. You may not be an alcoholic or drug addict but you could seek out some of the other twelve step programs, like Al-anon, ACOA or other groups to see if that's a fit. Churches and spiritual communities are also a very good ways to make connections and build relationships.

What is important, whatever the form, is to build an environment around you where you have access to safe and sustaining relationships in which trust can grow. People have used meet up groups as a way to find other like-minded people.

Have there been ways that you've found to meet people? Send me an email and let me know. I'll help spread the word so others can feel connected and supported.

Safety/Being Present

Safety exists when you're present, in this very moment. When you're here, now, the entire weight of your history the unknown nature of the future, is not constantly bearing down on you.

When you can be “inside yourselves” —aware of shifting thoughts, feelings, and sensations —you have access to a feedback loop that you begin to trust. You can also be aware of the space between and around whatever is arising.

One very good way of helping to establish this kind of awareness is through meditation or centering practices. These skills provide ways for you to listening to yourself, while supporting you in discriminating between what is working and what is not.

Meditation

Meditation practice provides two foundational skills that are useful in navigating your internal world. Mindfulness is one; concentration is the other. These are covered in more detail in the Module on Meditation. Here's a brief recap.

Mindfulness practices engage you in being with something inside or outside, without judgment, criticism, evaluation or story making. It allows you to notice, observe and drop the content and the interpretations of what is happening. For most of us, this takes practice since we're so prone to adding in layers of concepts, stories, and interpretations on top of what we observe.

Concentration practices involve focusing your attention where you want it to go and holding it there. Imagine how critical this is for trauma survivors in the middle of a flashback. That's where you get a clear cut example of concentration's usefulness. As you learn to concentrate on something in the present (such as your breathing, or the sensory experience of seeing or touching something), you'll learn to stem the tide of dysregulation that threatens when a flashback pulls you toward the emotional experience of earlier trauma.

A hopeful perspective helps immensely

There is no logical understanding or reason for all the pain and suffering people endure in this world. Learning to cultivate a hopeful perspective helps many people hold the difficulties of life in a greater frame of reference. Knowing what is important to you, what you value, and learning ways to embody those qualities will make an enormous difference. Any time you contact what you value will guide you toward a life built on a sense of strength and realistic hope. Only you can know what framework works for you.

There is no way to do this right. There is no way to do this wrong.

The attitude any one of us cultivates makes all the difference in our experience. Perhaps the most helpful attitude is an experimental one. In an experiment, there's plenty of room to modify strategies and directions, depending on what you find. Holding this attitude lets you off the hook of doing it right; there is no grading system, and there's no way to do it wrong. There is just pure exploration.

With regard to the Becoming Safely Embodied™ Skills I know that if you give these practices a try and see what happens, you'll learn something. You'll find out something that will help you.

If something doesn't work, discard it or modify it so it does work for you. Give me feedback! It helps help me provide new solutions and tailor the skills to your particular situation.

One thing that's certain, old habits of blaming, shaming, and humiliating don't work very well. If we encourage ourselves to maintain curiosity we can hold open the door to discover what is fresh and new and untainted by the past.

Simple Things that help being in a body

Becoming Curious: When we're in the midst of something new or intense, we can become blinded by our fear of the unknown. Learning to stay open and become curious about what's going on creates the opportunity to explore what's happening and to learn from it.

Breathing: So often you'll hear the suggestion to take deep breaths. If you've experienced trauma, you may find that difficult, because taking full, deep breaths may sometimes expand the range and/or intensity of what you're feeling. And that may not be exactly what you want to happen! Some breathing patterns are better for calming, some for energizing. Experiment with different breathing patterns to see what happens. Here are several to try:

Little sips of breath. Sometimes you might need to just take in a little bit of breath so that you bring some fresh oxygen inside, without disturbing your internal state too much. Try taking a little sip of breath, not a big gulp, but just enough to keep going. This is not about hyperventilating and it's not the same as panting.

Pausing – In yoga we call this kumbach. Yogis practice many different kinds of breathing. The variation that includes holding the breath on the in-breath or the out-breath is called *kumbach*. When you feel anxious, try taking a breath in and holding the breath for a brief second, then exhale slowly and hold the breath out for a brief second. Don't do too many cycles, which could intensify your experience instead of calming you. Try breathing one cycle of inhalation and exhalation; breathe normally and see how you are. If you're comfortable, try again: breathing in, holding, exhaling and then holding. Some people find it helps to only hold the inhalation, or only the exhalation. See what works for you.

Three-part breath. In order to fill yourself with oxygen, imagine filling your lungs up completely. Begin by taking a deep gentle breath, so deep that your belly

gradually stretches out. This does not involve force; it's more a matter of opening and allowing.

Next time when you breathe into your belly, take some more breath in and feel your chest expand. On the third breath top it off with some breath into the collarbone area.

You'll also want to see what it's like to expel your breath in three parts too—first from the collarbone area, then from your chest, and then from your stomach. You might think of it like emptying a glass. Practice this for a few cycles.

Relaxing the body: When we get upset, our muscles tighten and contract. Letting go of that tension allows you to relax more fully. But for some who have experienced trauma, relaxing may feel dangerous. Try letting your body relax when you are in a safe place, and invite yourself to mindfully experience what's happening in the process, rather than close yourself off to your own experience. Use your breath to stay focused on the here and now, and to help observe (rather than identify with) your experience. Go slowly.

Discriminating Aspects of Experience

What do you feel when you focus your attention inside yourself? What's the experience you are having right now? Is it happening because of thoughts you're having, or feelings, or body sensations? You might not know, or you might not yet be able to distinguish one sensation or feeling from other. In time you will be able to differentiate more easily among the various internal states.

Right now, just begin to notice what's happening *without trying to change anything*. You might want to start a journal and record what you discover. See if you can use the ideas listed below to help you.

Externalizing: Often there is so much going on inside it's hard to be really aware of each and every element of your internal experience.

It may help to externalize something that seems overwhelming—that is, to imagine what you feel inside as if it existed independently outside yourself. Give it a name, a shape, or a character, and engage in a dialogue with that part of you. Write or draw that aspect of your experience.

By externalizing an aspect of your experience, you may be able to stay in touch with it, without getting lost in it. And you may begin to discover something about it that had remained hidden or unarticulated.

Noticing and Naming: Learn to become aware of what is going on in and around you. For example, walking across the street you might be so caught up in what's going on inside that you aren't aware of the light changing, the people around you, the scent of fall leaves, or the touch of a soft breeze.

Practicing noticing and naming opens you up to what is—inside and out. Try it out. Notice what's going on around you right now, but don't get caught up in a story about it. *Just notice, name, and let go.*

Catching yourself being unaware is already a victory! I can't stress this enough. So what if you were spaced out or obsessing about something? Now is the perfect time to start noticing what you were filtering out of awareness. Coming back is all it takes.

Dis-identifying: Practicing naming what is there allows you to be more fully aware of an experience without getting caught up in it. Dis-identifying from something is different from dissociating from it. When you dissociate, you leave yourselves behind; dis-identifying from something reminds you that you are very much present, without getting lost in whatever it is you are experiencing.

Harnessing and Directing your Energy

Noticing: Once you notice, you can make changes. It's hard to change things when you don't notice what's going on or can't pinpoint precisely what is happening. It's empowering to direct your attention where you want to go and find out you can change your experience. You'll find you're no longer trapped in experiences you don't like having.

Compassion: In order to shift your negative mind states, most of us need to cultivate compassion for ourselves and others. Unfortunately our world, and often our internal experience, is inundated with harsh criticism and judgments. Caring and kindness can often be in short supply. Since these qualities tend to be rare, consider yourself a pioneer every time you embrace them.

Practicing Becoming Safely Embodied Skills

We've heard it all our lives: Practice makes perfect.

Yet, the discipline of doing something over and over and over and over again can get boring. We lose our interest. We lose our focus.

Whenever we get engrossed in something our attention focuses completely and totally on the object we're focusing on. If we do focus over a period of time whatever we've been focusing on becomes the subject of our thoughts and feelings over the ensuing days/weeks.

I see this a lot when I've been on a meditation retreat. The hours of practice changes the background noise in my mind. There's a tipping point when I start meditating in my dreams or chanting is happening in the background or the stillness I've been cultivating rests my mind and the chatter is negligible.

Other arenas bring this out as well. Say you've been skiing for a couple days. At night when you're ready to sleep your muscles are still participating in the sport, small muscle twitches and shifts. Conditioning is happening.

It happens to me as well when I watch the all-consuming three week-long Tour de France. Certainly, I'm not a participant! But watching and engaging with the material hour after hour, day after day I find myself thinking about the riders, the race at various times of the day. I can even dream about it.

The focus of concentration alters my internal experience.

One of the things that will make a difference in what you get out of this course is how often you put what you're reading and hearing about into practice.

One of the ways that brings what you're learning to life is to share what you're thinking, experiencing as a result of trying the Becoming Safely Embodied™ Skills. Let safe others know what you're exploring, what is opening up for you, and what insights you are have.

If you're anything like me, you'll want everything to change instantly, including yourself! I've found from working with many, many people that it's only by practicing one thing frequently that you master the skills so that they're available when life gets challenging. When the heat is turned up, you need to have these skills so well developed that they function almost automatically. That means practice, practice, practice.

It's essential to practice what you hope to learn. When you practice the BSE™ skills they'll become more familiar and easier to remember. Eventually they become part of procedural (habitual) memory and begin to replace old dysfunctional habits.

Each skill has a practice component. You can do the practices on your own or with someone that feels safe to you. If you're in therapy you might find it helpful to do the practice with your therapist.

Actively practicing in every session shifts the “wisdom” from someone outside you to finding your own inner wisdom. And that's the most important part of all!

Practice every day. I'll keep encouraging you to practice the same skill every day for a while so that it becomes as old and familiar as the patterns you are trying to shift. Many people also find it helpful to keep a journal of their experience and re-read it at those times when using the skills is difficult.