



The Power of Coaching the Whole Person

When coaches engage in body-centered coaching, we are coaching the SOMA, which comes from the Greek meaning: “the body living in its wholeness.” Wholeness means how we grow and change, how we respond to our external and internal environment, what nurtures us, and what is wanted and needed to move towards whole-self wellbeing and fulfillment.

The power of body-centered coaching is in its experiential nature. When we invite all parts of the client’s internal experience into the coaching conversation, **we bring experiential awareness and learning right into the coaching session. We facilitate “the self, experiencing itself” and from there we elicit new awareness and learning.** It’s a little like the difference between talking about doing something you love and actually doing it.

Coaching is by its very nature experiential. We request our clients to take action. They go out and have an experience. We elicit any new awareness or learning from that experience and how they can apply it going forward. And the cycle repeats. Experience informs awareness and learning and that learning informs the next experience. In this way clients move towards achievement of goals and their bigger life vision. Learning and experience are reciprocal; together they work to forward desired change. **When we invite the whole living self into the coaching conversation, we ALSO circumvent the problem of clients getting “stuck in their head.”** The Irish novelist and Nobel prize winner, James Joyce wrote a collection of short stories called *The Dubliners*. Joyce describes one of his characters, Mr. Duffy, in the following way: “Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body.”

As Richard Strozzi-Heckler, PhD points out, the problem with this notion of living a short distance from your body is that there is no such thing as a disembodied mind. Our brains don’t stop at the base of our skull. *Amanda Blake*, the author of *Your Body is Your Brain* describes very eloquently how the brain is distributed throughout the entire body. She describes the body as an instrument of action and that before it can be an instrument of action it is our lens of perception, how we take in information from the world outside and translate it in a meaningful way. Our lens of perception includes our exteroception, interoception and proprioception.

We experience ourselves through our exteroceptive senses: our eyes, ears, nose, mouth, taste and sense of touch. I invite you to stop reading for a moment for a moment and to experience your body as a lens of perception with this simple exercise. With eyes open or closed just notice the temperature. Do you feel cool or warm? Do you feel the temperature differently in different parts of your body? Now notice any physical sense of pressure, maybe the pressure of your feet on the floor or your pelvic zone if you are sitting. Notice if anything feels tight and contracted or loose and relaxed. Now notice movement. Maybe you can feel your heart beating or the movement of breath in your chest or belly. Maybe a leg or arm, foot or hand is moving, or tapping or something else. And now just take a moment to notice if you had not been consciously aware of these sensations before this exercise. Do you notice how easy it is to filter out what our body is experiencing from our conscious awareness?

And we experience ourselves interoceptively, through our internal viscera and organs. This might be experienced as a knot in your stomach, a lump in your throat, your heart racing, having a sinking feeling in your gut, or filled with a sense of pride. From these few examples, do you notice how our common language is filled with metaphors for emotions that are felt in the body? I invite you to think about

someone, something, a person, pet, animal, or place that you love and that makes you feel happy. Just for a moment see if you can really connect with that loved being or happy place. What do you notice in your body? Are you noticing a feeling coming from your heart or someplace else in your body? Dr. Daniel Siegel speaks of the importance of helping people to consciously engage their senses and movement and helping them get out of their heads. When we do get out of our heads, he notes that we can more readily tap into intuition, which is often associated with the gut, imagination and insight.

We also experience ourselves through proprioception, our internal intelligence that signals the position of our body in space. A client I worked with was concerned about their relationship with their partner, and not feeling competent or autonomous in the relationship. As they described what they were feeling, they began to lean to the right. The client was completely unaware of this movement and posture. When we began to explore it, the client became very clear of how it represented their feeling of being off-balance and uncomfortable in the relationship and out of sync with self. When we explored what was wanted, reclaiming their inner sense of autonomy and competence and how different that felt experientially, the client very organically shifted into an upright, straight and tall posture. From here the client could embody the desired shift and consciously move towards their desired state of being both internally and in the relationship. We could have taken a longer time talking about this. But for this client, the body-centered experience spoke volumes that words alone could not have.

All this is to emphasize that the body, mind, emotion and spirit do not and cannot function in separate and independent silos, but rather as an integrated whole. The more we invite all the parts of the whole self into the coaching conversation, the more we invite clarity, new awareness, shifts in perspective and insight, all things that lead to change.

My experience with body-centered coaching has shown me that inviting the entire self into the coaching conversation often helps to arrive at clarity much faster. One of the things I've noticed is that the body simply cannot lie. When we are stuck in our heads, we absolutely can come up with all kinds of rationalization stories that keep us stuck. Tapping into the body's wisdom and intelligence has a way of circumventing that, creating an opening for deeper awareness, the foundation of change, followed by intentional and conscious movement toward desired change.

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