



Exploring the Felt-Sense

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“One of the clearest lessons from contemporary neuroscience is that our sense of ourselves is anchored in a vital connection with our bodies. We do not truly know ourselves unless we can feel and interpret our physical sensations; we need to register and act on these sensations to navigate safely through life”.- Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*.

While Eugene Gendlin coined the term “felt-sense” several decades ago, it refers to an innate capacity as old as humanity itself. To offer a simple definition, the felt-sense is everything that is not conceptual thinking. Nearly everyone (with the exception of highly traumatized people) have some experience of what it means to feel things in their bodies. We are all familiar with the so-called five senses but those hardly capture the range of human sensory experience. Some obvious other examples include our emotions, the experience of pain, feeling hungry, the “runner’s high” that comes with peak athletic experience, the inner peace that can result from a walk in the woods, the state of “flow” making art or music, or a sexual encounter. There is also proprioception (knowing where our bodies are in space), our sense of balance, and our intuition or gut-sense. All of these experiences give us critical information about our lives.

Try this experiment: First, take one minute and think about your hands in whatever way you choose. You can look at them and name the parts or imagine the bones and tendons inside. You could also think about their function in your life. Yes, this may seem almost too simple, but just take a moment and give it a try. These are the *concepts* your mind has about your hands.

Now, take five minutes and do something different: *Feel* your hand. For example, instead of thinking about the concept “skin”, close your eyes and really *feel* your skin. Imagine you are an alien that all of a sudden landed in this avatar human body, or like a wide-eyed infant wiggling your hand around and discovering it as if for the first time. Move the skin around and just notice the sensations with intense curiosity. No two places feel exactly the same. It’s tight in some areas, looser in others. Notice the differences in temperature, or your sensitivity at your fingertips versus your knuckles. Feel free to do this same exploration with other parts: the bones, the joints, or your blood vessels. It’s deceptively complex. Then: Try to notice the gap between the fixed concepts you have of your hand and the living, constantly changing direct experience of your hand. Your “hand” is really just a bunch of sensations! In psychotherapy we are interested in bringing this same *quality of awareness* to clarify and deepen the emotions and intuitions of our unseen inner world.

A great question to keep in your back pocket when you are feeling something is, “How do I know I’m feeling x, y or z?..” What *information* in your body tells you that this is what you are feeling?

Love may be a soft warmth in your heart area; excitement, an upward flowing energy through your core; anxiety, sharp “butterfly” sensations in your belly; sadness, the “lump in your throat” when you want to cry but believe you shouldn’t; anger, the feeling of a “hot head”. Discover how it is for *you*. Notice that your emotions, intuition, creative inspiration and love are all actually first registered as a constellation of sensations and movements in your body. Using the felt-sense is like hooking directly into the mainframe, accessing the raw data before it is processed by the thinking mind. Another name for it is interoception, or inner seeing.

Furthermore, when we check out, hit our favorite addiction, blame others or “lose it”, it is really because our sensations are overwhelming. So just notice: What is happening then? By learning to explore and hold our sensations we can decrease our reactivity and increase our resiliency.

This awareness can also help with decision making. Our culture’s favored approach involves intellectually “figuring it out” by breaking down our problems into distinct parts. While this is a necessary and helpful part of the process, by including the felt-sense we also gain access to the holistic knowledge of our right brain and the vast neurological network that extends into our gut (today research on the “second brain” is a hot topic). This “gut sense” helps us make decisions by taking the big picture into account. Through experience we can begin to understand and include this non-conceptual information available in our bodies. Like a compass for your unique human journey, your intuition can help you to find greater clarity and ease, especially in big life decisions. If you’ve ever had the experience, “I just *knew* I should have done option a, not option b ..” this is the result of you hearing your felt-sense, but then not listening to that information.

Like any skill it takes practice. In addition to bringing more awareness into your daily life, *I highly suggest practices that regularly get you out of your head and into your body*. Consider a body-based meditation practice (such as Reginald Ray’s “10 points”), aerobic activity, yoga, dance or a hike. As always experiment, be playful, have fun and *find out what works best for you*.

As we cultivate our felt-sense we develop the ability to tolerate more distress while also increasing our capacity for love, connection, vitality, wholeness and flow.

With gratitude,

-Richard

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