

THE BODY IN THE SYSTEM – EMBODYING PRESENCE

Whether we're aware of it or not, as we work with a client and their system, our body tunes into the energies present in the whole environment, says [Amanda Ridings](#).

All coaching encounters take place in a complex system of systems. The energies present in what Mary Beth O'Neill¹ calls 'interactional fields' may be palpable, or so subtle as to be largely unnoticed. When there are disturbances in the field(s) such as moments of surprise, uncertainty, challenge, pressure, stuckness or stress, our system gets 'jammed'. Our ability to be present is compromised.

Presence is an embodied experience. When we say someone 'has presence,' the weight of their influence is almost tangible: we feel their presence. So it's unsurprising that, when we lose presence in a coaching encounter, we find vital signs in our body.

When perturbed by adverse or unexpected events, we may flinch, clench our jaw, tense our shoulders, or gird our loins. Perhaps we crumple, or pull back a little. We probably inhale sharply, or stop breathing. Alongside physical contractions and slumps, our attention narrows around the perceived issue, distorting our perspective. Internally, we're 'on alert,' primed to strike or protect. Our capacity to act with compassion and grace diminishes.

Attending to our physiology offers an early warning system. As coaches, it's crucial we learn how to decode these signals and recover presence.

There are many ways to develop greater body awareness. My favoured approaches are rooted in martial arts, and use gentle physical pressure to uncover our personal form of 'jamming'. Using touch as a proxy for psychological and/or emotional pressure reveals our signature survival patterns because the body doesn't discriminate between different kinds of pressure.

In coaching, being mindful of the body provides useful data. However, being aware we're off-balance is only a first step.

To regain embodied presence, we can learn to access a centred state of ease and expansiveness. In flow, obstacles seem to melt away, and difficult activities become effortless. We've all encountered this way of being at some stage in our life – perhaps when we've been running, making music, or playing chess. It's as if 'self' dissolves, and running is simply happening, music is making itself, or a chess move is simply 'known' rather than worked out. The question is: can we access this state consciously?

In centre, we're fully present to whatever is unfolding in us and in our environment. By using our attention and imagination, we can consciously create the conditions that make this state more likely, changing our relationship to people and systems.

The principle is to establish a softly aligned posture and spacious awareness that includes and accepts others, in all their humanness. If we practise this, we can protect ourselves from being hijacked by events; we have options: we can pause, exhale and make room to choose wisely.

It takes many repetitions to build the capacity for centred presence in our most challenging moments. And, however adept we become, it may sometimes still elude us!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Amanda Ridings is an APECS accredited executive coach, and is accredited as a coach supervisor by The Coaching Supervision Academy. She has practised the martial art of T'ai Chi Chuan since 1998 and has been weaving embodied approaches into her work since 2002.

She is the author of *Pause for Breath: Bringing the practices of mindfulness and dialogue to leadership conversations* (Live It 2011), which received a silver Nautilus award (conscious business and leadership).

Her signature leadership development programme explores embodiment through the medium of conversations – see www.originate.org.uk

¹ O'Neill, M. (2007), *Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart*. Jossey-Bass.