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Body Intelligence: A Guide to Self-Attunement

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Three pillars—somatic awareness, knowledge and level of engagement—offer a gateway to a healthy, vibrant life.

Psychologist Howard Gardner advanced the idea of multiple intelligences more than 25 years ago (Gardner 1983). Since then, there has been a growing appreciation of how individuals can excel in math while doing poorly in verbal areas or—more pertinent to the fitness world—how intelligence is represented in athletes' complex and graceful actions. Such performances require an *embodied* understanding of spatial relations, physics and kinesthetics. While Gardner talks about spatial and kinesthetic intelligences, there is more here than the ability to unerringly toss balls into baskets.

Consider the constructs of emotional (EQ) and social (SQ) intelligence popularized by Daniel Goleman (1995; 2006). These intelligences are by no means trivial. A low EQ can get you into serious trouble, for instance, when emotions rule your actions and result in harm. There's another type of intelligence that is equally critical in life: **body intelligence (BQ)**. Our conception of BQ is broader than Gardner's spatial or kinesthetic intelligence. It refers to how aware you are of your body, what you know and what you actually do for and with your body. The concept may sound new, but it is central to everything you do. This article will guide you through the components of BQ and offer diagnostic guides and practices aimed at increasing your clients' body intelligence.

The Three Pillars

As we explore the concept of body intelligence, consider the following examples:

Kyle is a superior physical specimen. He trains daily and eats well. He knows which exercises work different muscle groups. However, he constantly pushes beyond his pain threshold. It's a matter of habit. He treats his body as a machine—so much so that he feels detached from it.

Riham is a resident in internal medicine. She is a walking encyclopedia on symptoms of internal disorders. Yet, it's hard for her to find time for exercise, and her long hours have accustomed her to a questionable diet and chronic lack of sleep.

What's missing in each of these profiles? Is it knowledge of what to do? Awareness of bodily sensations and conditions? Or appropriate action?

BQ comprises **awareness, knowledge and engagement**. Imagine a three-legged table. If the legs are short, it's not much of a table. If the legs are uneven, the table becomes wobbly. BQ incorporates a deep and sensitive awareness of the body, both internally and externally. It embraces knowledge of what the body needs—and what it doesn't. It also encompasses action in a way that integrates awareness and knowledge. Rather than calling these elements legs, we refer to them as **the three pillars of body intelligence**.

The First Pillar: Awareness

Jan has a swollen ankle, which she ignores for weeks, believing it will get better. It doesn't. She finally gets it checked. The diagnosis: a fractured bone that now has to be reset.

How often do you experience aches and pains that you hope will go away? What physical sensations have you lived with so long that you think they're normal? Awareness is about being tuned into your body and its signals. It's about being awake to how your body "speaks" to you. Theorists such as Ken Wilber (2000) distinguish between gross and subtle body sensations. **Gross sensations** include experiences like soreness in your muscles after weight training. **Subtle sensations** relate to awareness of body energies, experiences of flow or knowing where joy shines in your somatic being. Being keenly aware of your body allows you to make adjustments in the moment; for example, when you are sitting awkwardly or sensing the energy shift in the environment. It also means being conscious of the impacts that certain foods or physical practices have on your well-being.

The greater your body awareness, the more you are in control of bodily outcomes. Being attuned to the effects of that first cup of coffee gives you a base for choosing or refusing a second cup. Sensitivity to kinesthetic cues allows you to correct your posture before you begin a set of bench presses. A strict "mind over matter" or "you can do it" approach often dampens body awareness in the pursuit of goals or results. A portion of body awareness may be hard-wired into your genetic code; however, much of the awareness pillar is fostered through experience and learning.

The Second Pillar: Knowledge

If you ask clients whether they knowingly engage in any unhealthy habits, most of them will say yes, or something like, "I probably don't drink enough water, but then I never know how much is enough." Both answers reflect some knowledge of the body and its needs. We live in a time where threats to our physical existence show up as headlines in whatever media we tune into, and yet, paradoxically, most people live as if the rules did not apply to them. The other dilemma of this information age (Castells 2009) is that after a few Google searches people often claim a self-ascribed expertise. Instant access to virtual realms of information permits us to argue almost any position.

Body knowledge is akin to what scientists call "health literacy" (Hasnain-Wynia & Wolf 2010). How much do you know about accepted standards and guidelines for healthy bodily functioning? Or, to up the ante, how well do you know the formula for achieving "optimum health" (Hyman & Liponis 2003; Weil 2005)? Knowing scientific facts is an important part of health literacy; however, it's not enough. Body knowledge also refers to an understanding of the actions needed to diagnose and treat physical concerns. Applying generic scientific body knowledge on a personal level, do you know what steps to take in order to learn what's going on in your body?

Another point: body knowledge isn't just about volume, or how much you know; it's also about what you consider valid. Western medical practitioners may eschew nontraditional sources of data about health and wellness, while advocates of alternative approaches may support their methods with equal rigidity. And while you can exhaust yourself trying to discover the "truth" about different conditions, the knowledge pillar of BQ is partially demonstrated in your ability to assess the level of information you can accurately interpret without expert consultation.

The Third Pillar: Engagement

Teresa knows the answers. She has studied the research and consulted the best practitioners. But she yo-yos in whatever she needs to do. She simply can't stick with the plan.

Many clients who hire trainers begin with an apology: "I know I should exercise more, but I haven't been able to." The excuses reflect their knowledge; the symptoms they describe suggest their awareness. However, after some months they disappear again. Engagement—or adherence—doesn't come easily.

Engagement isn't just about "doing it"; it's about doing the right thing repeatedly until you need to switch to the next right thing.

Engagement is commitment to intelligent action based on what you need at this point in your life. Executives who travel the globe weekly

would love to log 8 hours of sleep every night, but that's not practical. So what's the best alternative? How can you configure your life so you create optimal health in all facets of your somatic self?

Motivational theories pivot around action. **Self-efficacy** (Bandura 1977), for instance, argues that people need to feel confident in their abilities to engage successfully in behaviors before they will do them reliably. A bit of a chicken-and-egg dilemma! Trainers work with clients on exactly this challenge—building skill levels so clients can exercise autonomously on a regular basis. Yet, they still fall off the log.

Engagement is intimately tied to knowledge and awareness. If this were not the case, the third pillar would create as many problems as it is intended to relieve. The marathoner who scoffs at wearing orthotics or the cyclist who never stretches is not demonstrating BQ. Action must work in harmony with reflection and information in a lifelong process.

Three Levels of Body Intelligence

When helping clients understand how to appreciate and navigate their own BQ, it's helpful to know the different levels of somatic intelligence. Remember taking an IQ test? Your scores in individual areas were summated to arrive at your overall score. While your total IQ may be high, that score might mask a low capacity in abstract reasoning, for example. The same is true of BQ. Moreover, just as you may be categorized as average, above average or genius depending on your IQ score, there are likewise three ranges for body intelligence: **deficient, sufficient** and **evolutionary**.

Different combinations of levels apply to clients. A client may be deficient in awareness, sufficient in knowledge and sufficient in engagement. It's also possible for a client to be evolutionary in awareness and knowledge, yet deficient in action. It's unlikely, however, that a client who is deficient in awareness and knowledge will be evolutionary in engagement. Some combinations make sense; others don't.

Deficiency Range

When clients are deficient in all three pillars of BQ, they have probably entered your world in a state of desperation. Maybe a doctor's threats finally got through, or some personal upheaval (job loss, divorce, tragedy) has created a temporary opening for change. It's likely they have multiple patterns of body neglect or abuse. They may smoke, drink too much, eat poorly, exercise little and be living with the consequences of this lifestyle. The good news is that you have a wide range of interventions to choose from, and any change is likely to be positive. You can suggest reading materials, teach them about their bodies and start them on healthy practices.

You will also meet clients who are deficient in only one pillar, most likely engagement. They acknowledge that exercise and healthy lifestyles are important, and they're sufficiently attuned to their body signals to be motivated to change. Here it's a case of strategically using their **cognitive dissonance**—the tension they feel about acting in ways contrary to their beliefs or knowledge (Festinger 1957). People with this profile are likely to show up and make serious change efforts, at least for a while.

With clients who are deficient in two pillars, you will have a greater challenge. By virtue of upbringing or situational factors, a person might eat reasonably well (e.g., the client is living in a farming community with little access to junk foods), get enough physical activity and sleep sufficiently. But all this might change if the situation alters. Imagine an immigrant who is not used to processed foods and is now bombarded with North American fare. Without much knowledge and perhaps with a conditioned inattention to body processes, things could slip badly. The key is to know the client's strengths and what can be leveraged for change. If awareness is strong, then focusing actions on creating "feel-good" states through exercise and nutritional regimens would be a sound plan.

Sufficiency Range

It would be great if sufficiency in all three pillars was the average state of BQ in our world, but it's not. Based on statistics for exercise alone (Kruger, Kohl & Miles 2008), most North Americans simply don't get enough physical activity. Sleep is also in short supply (National Sleep Foundation 2010). And eating habits have been seriously impacted by shifting family structures, economic factors and time demands (Blatt 2008).

There's also a risk that clients in the sufficiency range will feel overwhelmed. They simply can't keep up with what they know they should do and what you and other professionals tell them their bodies need. When cognitive dissonance gets too high, they may turn down the volume and begin to rationalize their behaviors. These clients don't experience much joy from engaging in healthy practices, particularly if they have a pattern of dutiful compliance in regard to caring for their bodies.

If engagement is sufficient but either awareness or knowledge is deficient, there is reason for concern. Action without sufficient awareness can result in injury or bodily harm. Think of a novice exerciser who lacks somatic awareness. If she is lucky, she will avoid serious discomfort or injury; if not, her lack of awareness is one more negative that you need to counter. Deficiency in knowledge is also important to address: you want clients to be self-directing and well-informed; otherwise, they may blindly comply and grow to depend on you as their trainer.

Evolutionary Range

Think of individuals who are so alive in their bodies that they radiate energy. These people are keenly aware of their gross and subtle energies (Wilber 2000). They effortlessly put into practice sound knowledge and principles of healthy living. They aren't necessarily athletes, but they have a number of significant somatic practices that are part of their identities. These are not things they do begrudgingly. Maybe it wasn't always effortless, but they have evolved.

Evolutionary BQ has a unique profile of engagement. Awareness and knowledge coalesce with action in fluid expressions. The concept of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi 1997) applies here, but not in an ephemeral way; flow is readily accessible in daily life for individuals at this level.

It's more likely that evolutionary-BQ individuals are your teachers rather than your clients, though many clients show evolutionary patterns on one or more pillars. They may have deepened awareness through regular attunement practices, meditation or conscious reflection. They may be profoundly wise about different traditions of healing and body care. When they exercise, it will have a highly integrated quality to it—their minds and bodies have merged, and they move easily from their centers.

Don't be deceived by appearances. Clients who are very good at physical activity or sports may be talented but not evolutionary. Others who are highly knowledgeable may be talking heads. And those who have a long-term meditation practice may fall short on engagement. Look for ways in which you can foster their growth on other pillars. You may also discover ways in which these clients could be your teachers.

BQ Programming

What do you do with the information you glean from asking questions and assessing clients' strength in the three pillars (see the sidebar "Open-Ended Body Intelligence Questions")? If certain actions can raise BQ, where do you focus? In the fitness world, the mandate is mostly about action or engagement; however, action is often narrowly defined as the enactment of physical exercises (e.g., strength training to build physical muscles). For well-rounded BQ (encompassing all three pillars), you need to build awareness and knowledge muscles as well. This does *not* mean simply suggesting books or body scans. Awareness and knowledge can be as difficult to achieve as reliable adherence to exercise. It means that you, the fitness professional, must develop programming around these nonphysical agendas in the same way you do around physical goals. Call it "coaching," or call it "BQ training." Whatever name you choose, the core components will be exercising the mind

through reading and conversations; exercising awareness through regular attunement practices; and shifting body practices from the tried-and-true to the evolutionary.

Clients have to want change. When they do, it's important to focus on practices that enhance all three pillars of BQ. Following are some ideas to get you started (for more suggestions, see the sidebar "How to Build a Client's Body Intelligence: A Sampling"):

To Increase Awareness. Ask clients to do body scans not only when they exercise but throughout their days. This boosts their awareness over time. Journaling and meditation are wonderful aids to self-attunement, as are "stop-and-notice" practices. Cause-effect reflections involve noticing how you are feeling (good or bad) and reflecting on possible influences.

To Increase Knowledge. Certainly, recommend your favorite books—it's a start. But whatever reading program you suggest needs to be part of a client's *ongoing* practice. Attending conferences and seminars can also be helpful, and health webinars offer clients easy access to user-friendly information. Give them starting points and check in regularly. Part of knowledge acquisition is specific to their bodies. Do they know their cholesterol levels, blood pressure and other biochemistry stats? If not, how do they access this information and keep it current?

To Evolve Engagement. Habits are hard to break. What better way to change patterns and practices than through careful experimentation? This might begin with exercising consciously or paying attention to the sensations and thoughts that arise while training. Clients might also do their "usual" in an unusual manner. What 1-minute experiences can you suggest that will create greater flow in your clients' lives (the answer isn't just 30 push-ups)?

Body Intelligence in Professional Relationships

Kladja admires you, so much so that she tells all her friends that one day she is going to be just as ripped as you are and maybe even start a personal training business of her own.

These are commendable goals—perhaps. You know that what you do as a fitness professional is fundamentally about relationships (Cashdan 1988). There's you and your BQ, and then there are your clients and their BQs. Your uniqueness has led you to emphasize certain things and to steer clear of others. If your BQ is high, you are attuned to what works for you, continually learning and, of course, strongly engaged. And yet what works for you won't work for everyone.

It's only human to offer others the lessons that are most precious to us—we tell them how we did it, they watch us in action and then they imitate us, for better or worse. But your challenge lies elsewhere: How can you foster awareness that is based in clients' self-attunement? What literature can you suggest that goes beyond your personal favorites? How can you train clients in practices that stretch their unique biomechanics and motivational patterns? BQ isn't fixed for life. Start with yourself and then inspire the world.

SIDEBAR: Open-Ended Body Intelligence Questions

Understanding clients' BQ levels involves carefully observing your clients and asking them questions. In casual conversations, clients tell us about their beliefs, practices, knowledge and level of body awareness. Yet, we can also ask about what we *don't* know. Here are some open-ended questions that will allow you to estimate clients' BQ levels. The questions are grouped according to the three pillars, though responses to questions may encompass multiple pillars.

Awareness Questions

- When does your body feel good? Not so good? What do you attribute this to?
- What is the best you have ever felt physically? How do you think this came about?
- How do you know something is wrong with your body? What signals do you interpret?
- If you could suggest a metaphor to describe your body, what would it be (a machine, a complex highway system, a programmed computer, etc.)?
- What do you think about the idea that our bodies project something like energy waves? What's your experience of this?

Knowledge Questions

- What do you think you have to know about your body to take good care of it?
- What's your pattern of checking in with health professionals for various issues or concerns? Whom do you see and why? Are there professionals you wouldn't see?
- Where do you get information about health and nutrition? How often do you read articles and journals on health and nutrition? What sources do you regularly consult?
- How would you describe your understanding of your body? What do you know about human anatomy, physiology, kinesiology or neuroscience? What do you think you should know?
- What's a healthy diet to you? What should you eat? What should you avoid? How should you eat? Where did you get this information?
- What is your understanding of your body and physical activity? Where do you get your information?

Engagement Questions

- What's your formula for taking care of your body? How do you do it?
- What makes an exercise program right for you? What would be your ideal program? What would you be doing? How would you feel doing it? What would the desired effects be?
- Describe your diet over a typical week.
- What is your relationship to alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, caffeine and other substances?
- How much sleep do you need? How much do you get? What helps you sleep? What prevents you from sleeping? What is your sleep hygiene routine?
- What kinds of medications or supplements do you take? How did this come about?

SIDEBAR: How to Build a Client's Body Intelligence: A Sampling

Awareness Practices

body scans

meditation

journaling

stop-and-notice practices

cause-effect reflections

Knowledge Practices

reading books and journals

making prepared visits to practitioners

attending conferences

participating in webinars

engaging in academic coursework

Engagement Practices

consciously engaging in intelligent action (e.g., exercise)
doing the same things differently
trying something new
shifting patterns
doing 1-minute movements



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