

PERSONAL AGILITY:

*Practices for Being Present & Resourceful
When You Need It Most*

MITCH SAUNDERS



I created this guide for a group of managers that used to meet monthly to practice developing their capacity for personal agility. This discipline involves sensing and shaping currents of change that are already in progress and that originate from the wisdom of the body. More specifically, this approach is a reliable way to access and sustain optimal states of being. This is particularly important when you address dilemmas or high stakes challenges and there are no easy answers.

This guide is organized in a manner similar to the way I teach a sport such as basketball or soccer. I've tried to demystify dynamic processes; and highlight important elements, key choice points, and creative options. Specific practices are explained in detail so you can deepen your experience with this approach on your own.

In addition to being an aid for rapid recovery (for example, when you “triggered” by what someone says or does), I offer this guide to encourage you to consider every moment an opportunity to reveal and grow what is most essential, soulful and alive—in yourself, your relationships, and the world around you.

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What Is Somatics?

Somatics, a word derived from the Greek, defines the body as a functional, living whole rather than as a mechanical structure. Somatics does not see a split between the mind and body but views the soma as a unified expression of all that we think, feel, perceive, and express. In the art and science of somatics, we are encouraged to become the source of our information by participating in our knowing and self-discovery...

If we pay attention to the textbook of our body, we have access to an entirely new wisdom and language. Through our body we learn how to midwife ourselves through the births, maturing, and countless tiny deaths that form the continuity of our life...

When we are connected with our body, the present moment comes more into focus and we can then begin to make decisions from there. When we wonder about a direction to take or an alternative to assess, we can consult the intelligence that resides in our body. This type of education is revolutionary, in the sense that it gives power to the individual. It fosters a way of being that supports and trusts the energy that moves through all living things.

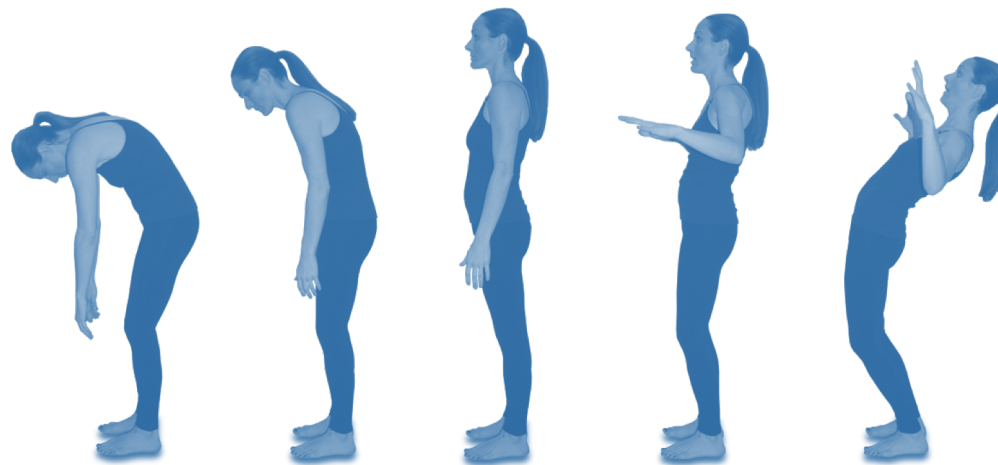
—RICHARD STROZZI HECKLER, *The Anatomy of Change*

Somatics: Working With The Wisdom Of The Body

Working with the wisdom of the body allows us to break free from inherited or imposed shapes and responses. Somatic flexibility helps us adjust our ways of being in the world in the most appropriate and liberating ways possible.



In addition to being an aid for rapid recovery, somatic practices can be used to turn defining moments into opportunities to reveal and grow what is most essential, soulful and alive in yourself, your relationships, and the world around you.

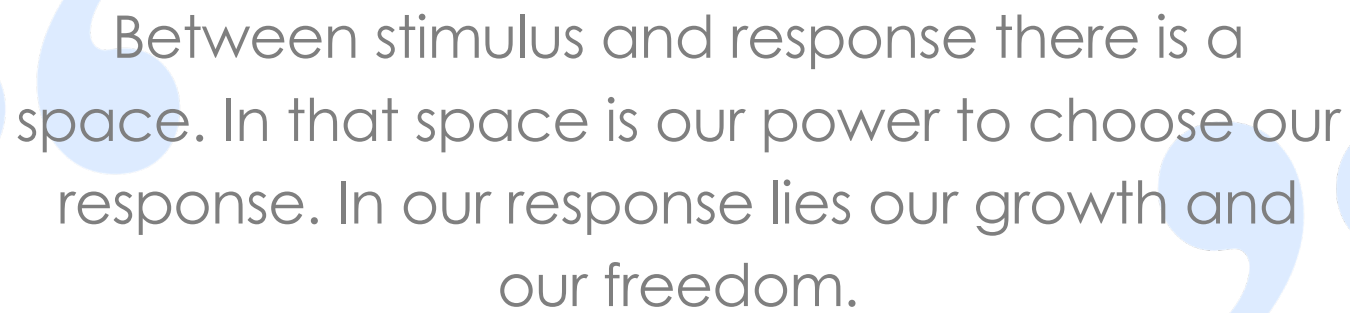


How do you shift from “off-balance” to a more resourceful state?
How do you respond without under- or over-reacting?
Would it be helpful if you could influence your own evolution?

Why Somatics?

An understanding of somatics and the ability to voluntarily alter your somatic state are powerful tools:

- Shift from “off balance” to resourceful state (e.g., in < 90 seconds).
- Influence the health of your parasympathetic functions (e.g., heart rate/rhythm variability, intestinal activity).
- Elevate “your game” to the next level by generating and rehearsing specific, improved ways to respond to the world around you.
- Evolve your (self-limiting) ways of being in the world (e.g., giving yourself away, avoiding intimacy, invasive, naïve, inflexible, scattered).



Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.

—VIKTOR E. FRANKL

Trigger Events Present Special Opportunities

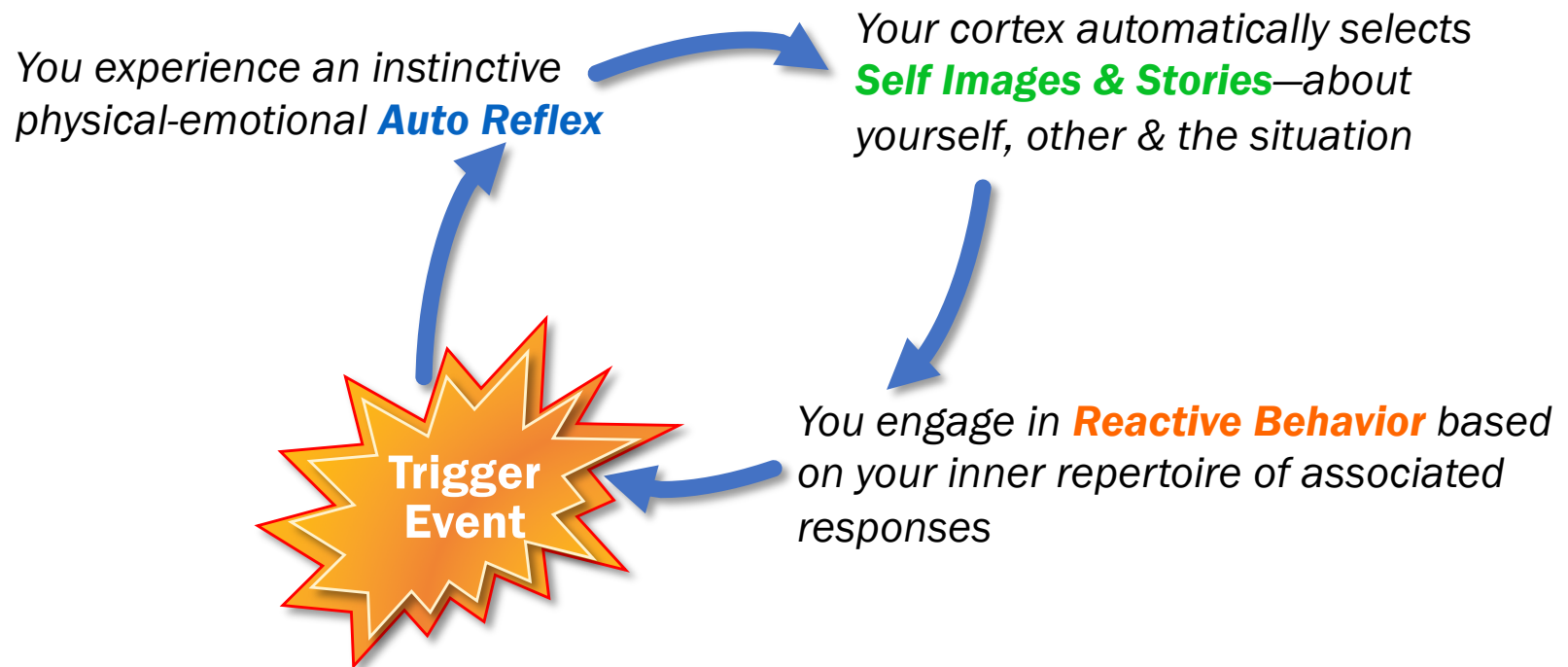
Trigger events are moments when you face surprise, challenge, and/or risk, or prolonged periods when you face dilemmas and questions for which there are no easy answers. At these times, the dynamic or energetic of change is activated naturally. Being “triggered” means we have a response-in-progress, and we can work with it.

Trigger events are especially important because their intensity startles you out of habitual modes of behavior. At these times, the biology of your body, relationship or organization naturally shifts and prepares for change. The task then becomes recognizing the opening and working with what is already in progress, rather than trying to force a particular ideal or outcome.

If you are able to perceive a trigger event as an opportune moment, you have choice. If you do nothing, chances are you will re-enact patterns based on the past. As an alternative, you can use intentional effort to influence reflexive responses that determine your decisions and actions. This is a powerful and elegant way to alter the trajectory of your history and to co-create the future.

The First Step:

Appreciating The Body-Mind Connection

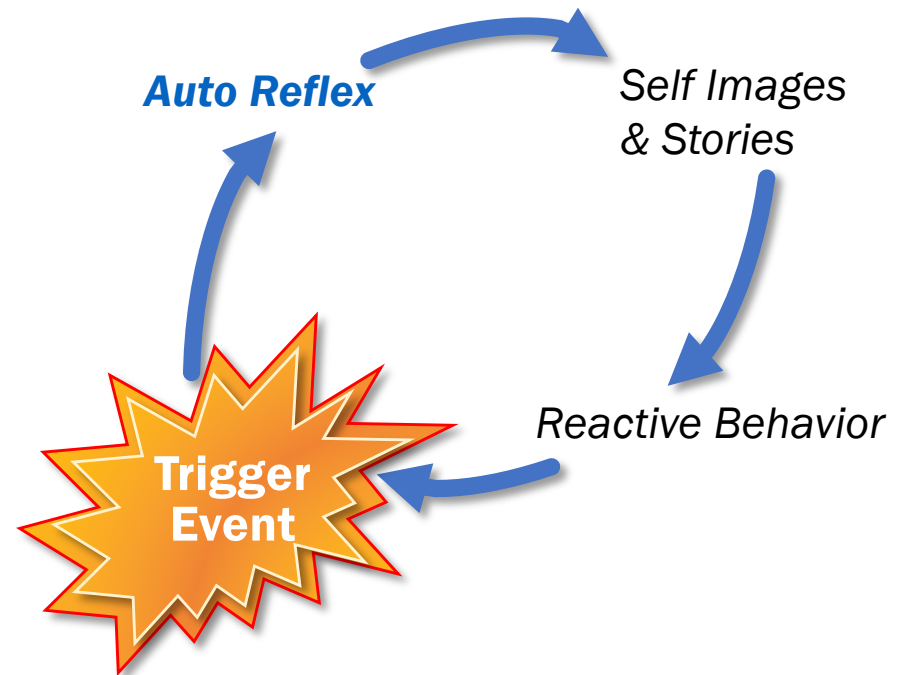


Note: Without self awareness, this natural and potentially helpful cycle can become vicious, an automatic re-enactment of the past even when that is not in your best interest.

How Vicious Cycles Happen: The Auto Reflex

In the face of a trigger event, your body responds automatically and instantaneously. This response can be observed as a pattern of physical gestures and a particular posture. This physical expression corresponds with your internal, emotional response. All of this happens without intentional effort or awareness.

The reflex involves physical changes that could be described as varying degrees of bracing or softening, contracting or inflating. **This Auto Reflex is a very powerful determinant in what happens next, because the reflex sends a signal to your brain indicating whether you are in a state of reserve, fear, receptivity, or attentiveness.**



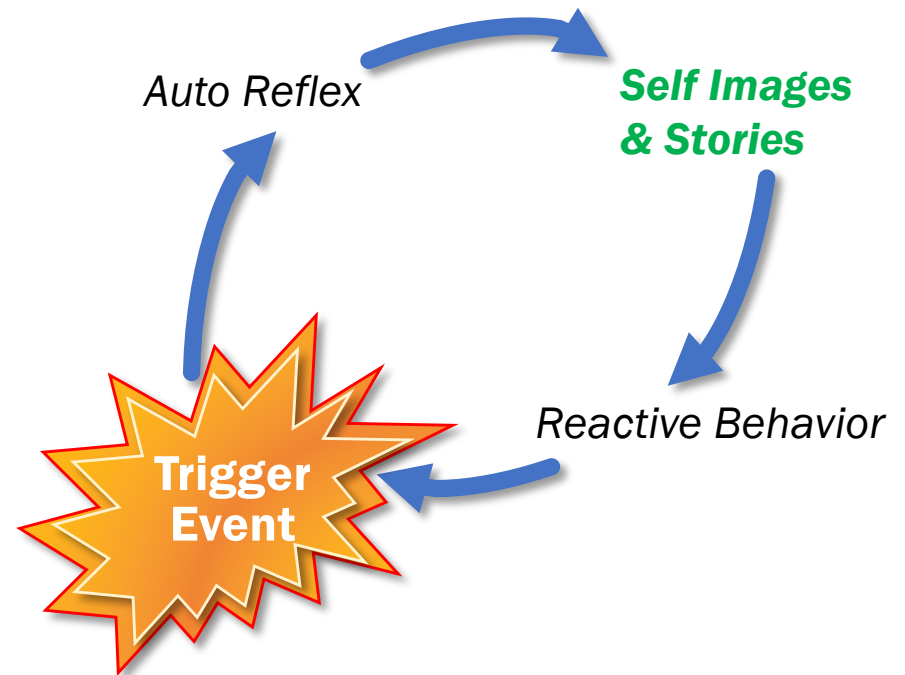
How Vicious Cycles Happen: Self Images & Stories

Your physical “attitude” tells your brain which identity image or self concept to organize, for example: Fixer, Survivor, Martyr.

Different self-images are associated with the kind of story you tell yourself—assumptions about yourself, the other, and the situation. If the self-image is over- or under-inflated, the resulting stories tend to emphasize something that is wrong, threatening, or not worthwhile.

A “self-defeating” image or story:

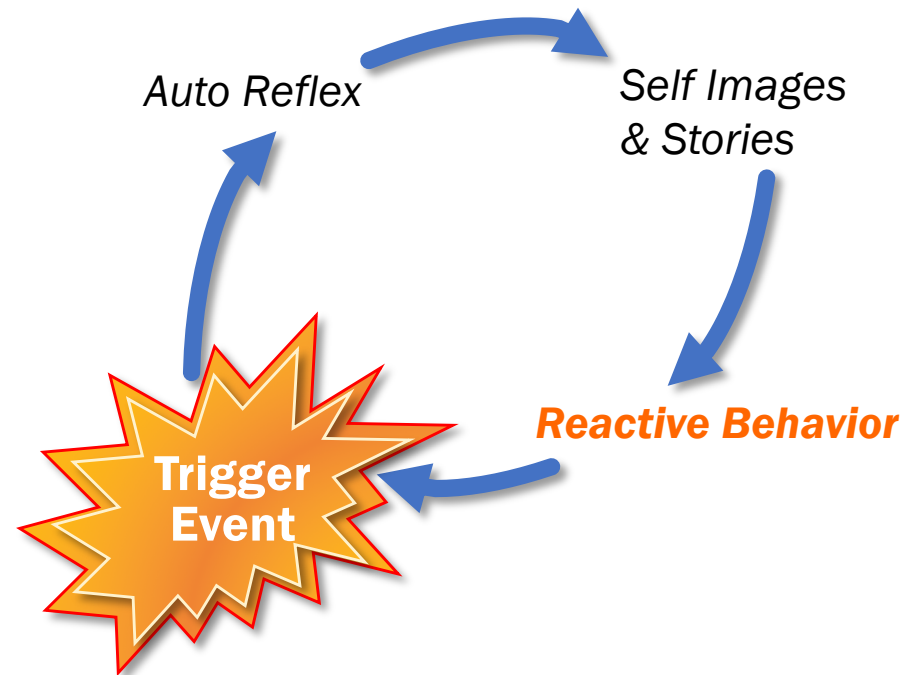
- 1) is inaccurate—based more on memories of similar, past triggers/reflexes than what is actually happening in the moment; and
- 2) increases the chances you will make choices and engage in behavior that leads to results you do not intend.



How Vicious Cycles Happen: Reactive Behavior

Once your brain selects a self-image and myth to apply to the situation, your behavior will generally follow the predetermined plot. If the story says the other shouldn't be trusted and the situation is dangerous, your behavior will emphasize defense, aggression, avoidance, and/or efforts to relieve discomfort. If on the other hand, the story portrays the other as worthy of your trust, and you as able to handle the situation, your behavior will be different.

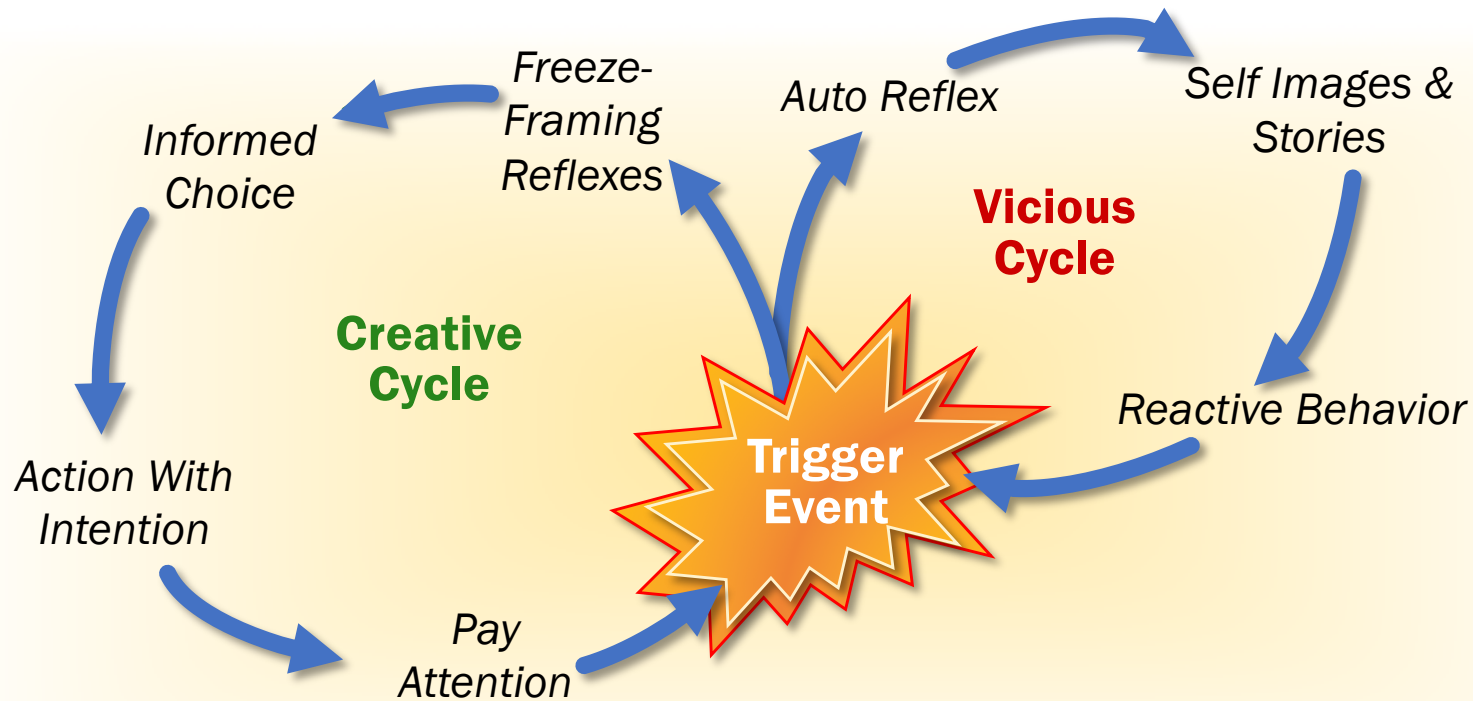
The quality of relationships at home and work are driven to a large extent by this rapid "involuntary" process. Without attention to what is happening, key choices and actions are selected automatically and instinctively; without awareness. And all of this all happens "in the wink of an eye."



It's Your Choice!

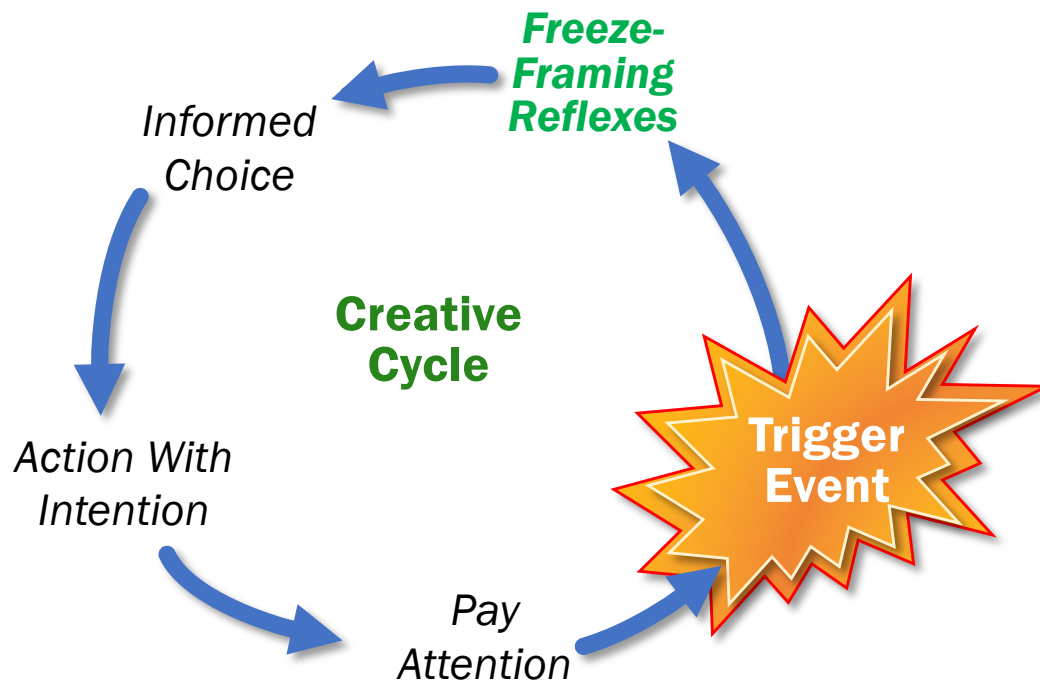
Sensing & Shaping The Future

Re-enacting the past

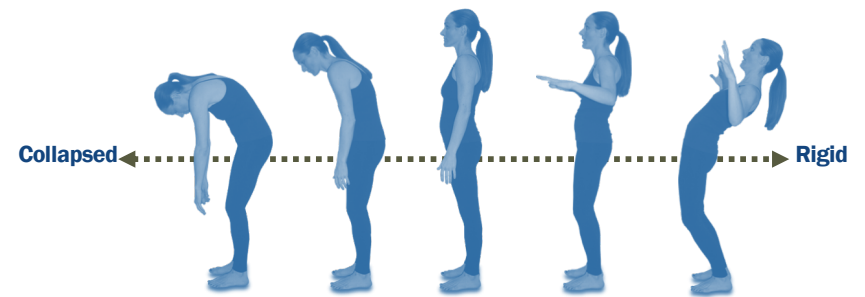


Recognizing and shifting your somatic responses helps you shape your future.

How Creative Cycles Happen: Freeze-Framing*



You stop and notice which attitude is already in progress. Are you embodying a state of openness, receptivity, fear, or attentiveness?

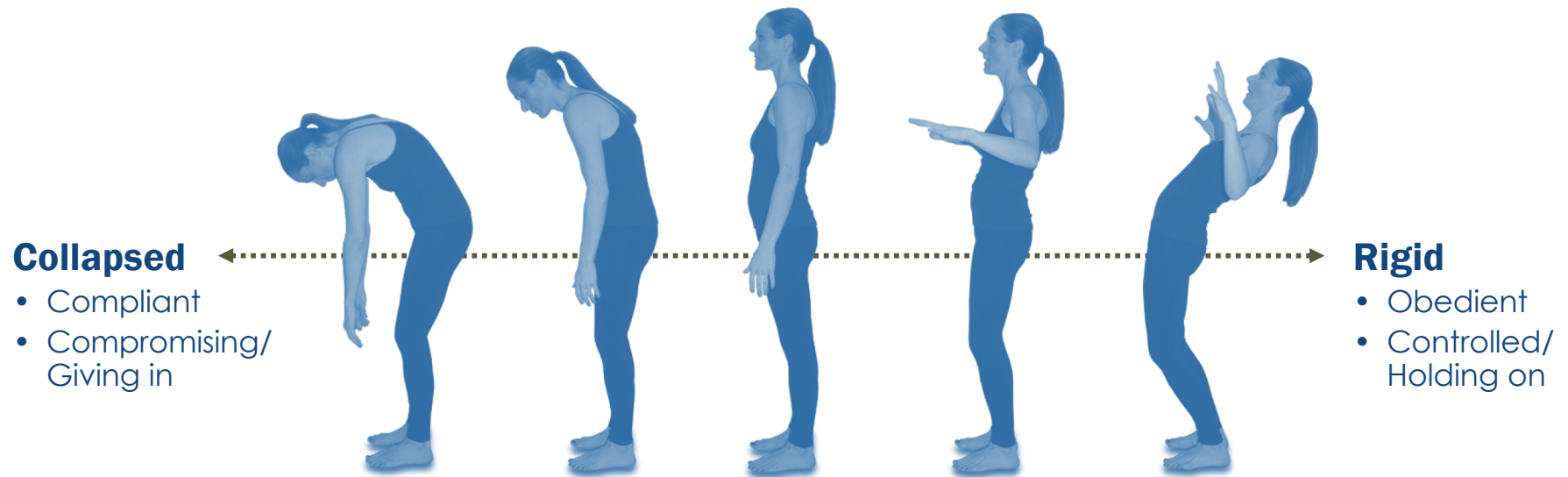


By intensifying and de-intensifying the original attitude, and freezing each frame, you expand the options available. Instead of just one, you generate and examine several potential embodiments, each with its own set of feelings, stories about you, the other, and the situation, plus a corresponding repertoire of responses. This practice—intentional movement between distinct somatic attitudes—generates and reinforces the neural connections essential for new options in the future.

* “Freeze-framing,” a term coined by Stanley Keleman, refers to a formative method for using the body to form new options.

Begin With The Current Response

Any pattern of behavior can be thought of as a continuum. For example, a given reflex is just one of several options:



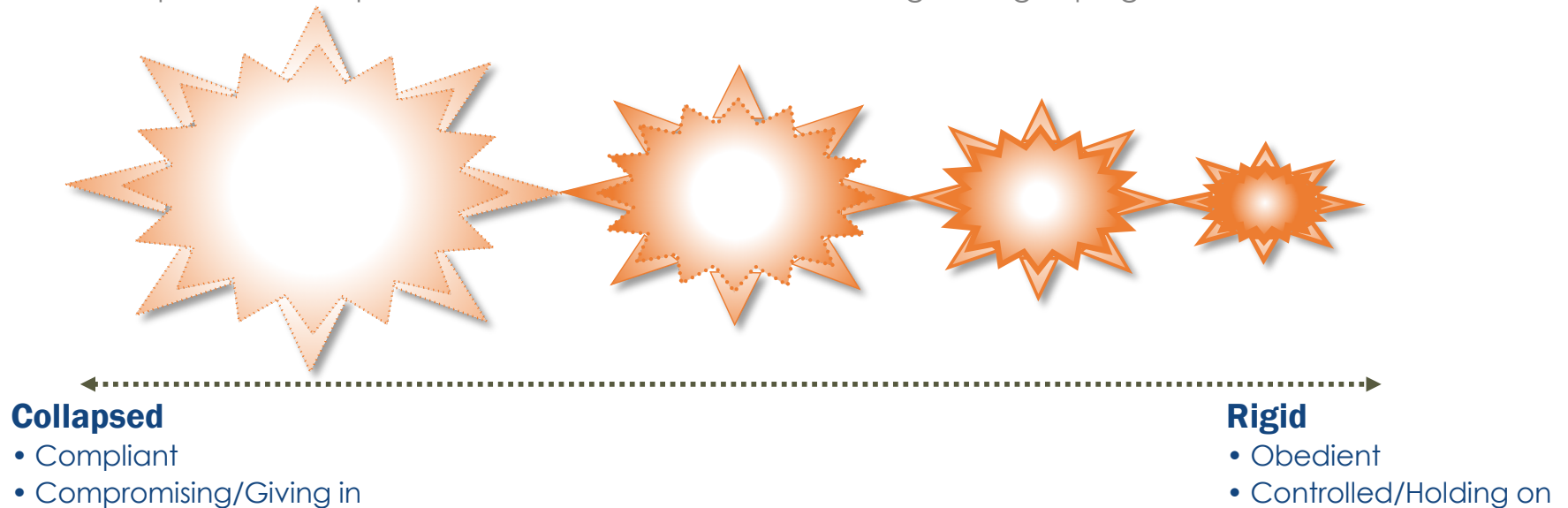
- The key to shifting the quality of your presence is to intentionally alter the muscular patterns associated with each distinct state.
- The premise underlying this approach is that learning how to use your self—to change a given or inherited physical-emotional state—is the key to self-knowledge, true responsibility, and intimacy.
- Changing shape “on purpose” also makes it possible to influence your own evolution—identity, guiding ideas and images, and the range of responses available in any situation.

What Happens On The Inside



Each reflex option or physical gesture has a corresponding organization on the inside. Contraction and expansion of channels within the body affects energy movement, such as blood flow and neural messaging. These channels, similar to the aperture of a camera, are the body's conduits for self awareness and action. The cortex matches stories and reactive behaviors with the qualities and characteristics of interior shapes, pulsations and spaces.

An extremely porous or collapsed emotional anatomy is best suited for behaviors that are compliant and compromising. A dense inner world yields eruptions, defensiveness and defiance. A rigid or contracted interior corresponds with repertoires that are obedient, controlling, and grasping.



Why Use The Hands

Hands are the most versatile parts of the body wall; they have an extraordinary range of possible movement. Hand gestures are like postures – shapes and actions – that give the soma feedback about feeling and intent. They are singular in their ability to communicate with the soma's internal and external world.

Hands are frames of muscular, cortical and emotional orientation. Changing hand shape creates spacial gradients, as well as gradients of pressure and time, all of which are communications of the body with itself and its cortex. They are an example of a localized effort affecting a generalized pattern of the body as a whole.

Applying voluntary effort, a person can use the hands to vivify bodily experience in the service of knowing and managing feeling and intent with oneself, with important others, and with the larger community. Differentiating hand gestures and attitudes is an entrance into subjective experience, and the hands become a somatic tool for forming a voluntary personal self.

—STANLEY KELEMAN, 2016

Altering Your State: Step by Step

- 1) **Notice** Recognize your body's auto reflex in its present behavior pattern. See if you can distinguish the muscular pattern informing your reflexive response.
- 2) **Do It More** Make the muscular pattern tighter and notice what happens. Then, using discreet steps, make the muscular pattern even tighter. With each shift, pause and notice how your state shifts.
- 3) **Do It Less** Decrease the tension in the muscular pattern. Again, using discreet steps, make the muscular pattern less tight. With each shift, pause and notice how your state shifts.
- 4) **Assimilate** Alternating between doing it more and less, find the state that you judge to be most appropriate and resourceful for the situation at hand. Try to hold this particular muscular pattern for a few minutes. See what kind of specific responses you can imagine using to address the situation.
- 5) **Rehearse** While maintaining the desired state, practice applying the new responses and behavior to the situation that needs your leadership.

—Adapted from STANLEY KELEMAN, *Myth and the Body*, 1999.

What to Notice When Altering Your State

As you freeze each reflex, attitude or behavior pattern, examine its associated library of possibilities. What follows are key questions to explore with each new option:

Feeling

How do you feel? What are you aware of in your body? To what extent are you open, attentive, receptive, or guarded?

Perspective

What's in or out of your field of vision? How broad, narrow, focused, peripheral? What are you saying to yourself about:

- Yourself?
- The other?
- The situation?

Purpose

What are you forming or growing? (In yourself? In the relationship?)

What do you want to have happen?

Responses

What can you imagine doing or saying? Selectively ignoring or avoiding?

The Trough

There is a trough in waves,
A low spot
Where horizon disappears
And only sky
And water
Are our company.

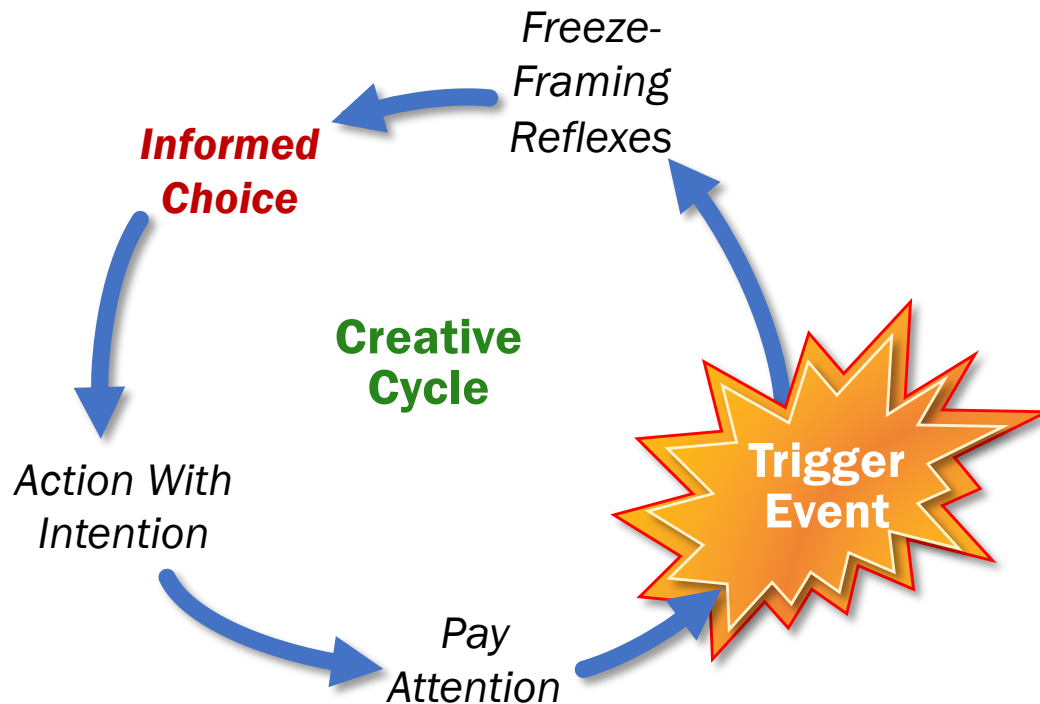
And there we lose our way
Unless
We rest, knowing the wave will bring us
To its crest again.

There we may drown
If we let fear
Hold us within its grip and shake us
Side to side,
And leave us flailing, torn, disoriented.

But if we rest there
In the trough,
Are silent,
Being with
The low part of the wave,
Keeping
Our energy and
Noticing the shape of things,
The flow,
Then time alone
Will bring us to another
Place
Where we can see
Horizon, see the land again,
Regain our sense
Of where
We are,
And where we need to swim.

—JUDY BROWN, *The Sea Accepts All Rivers*

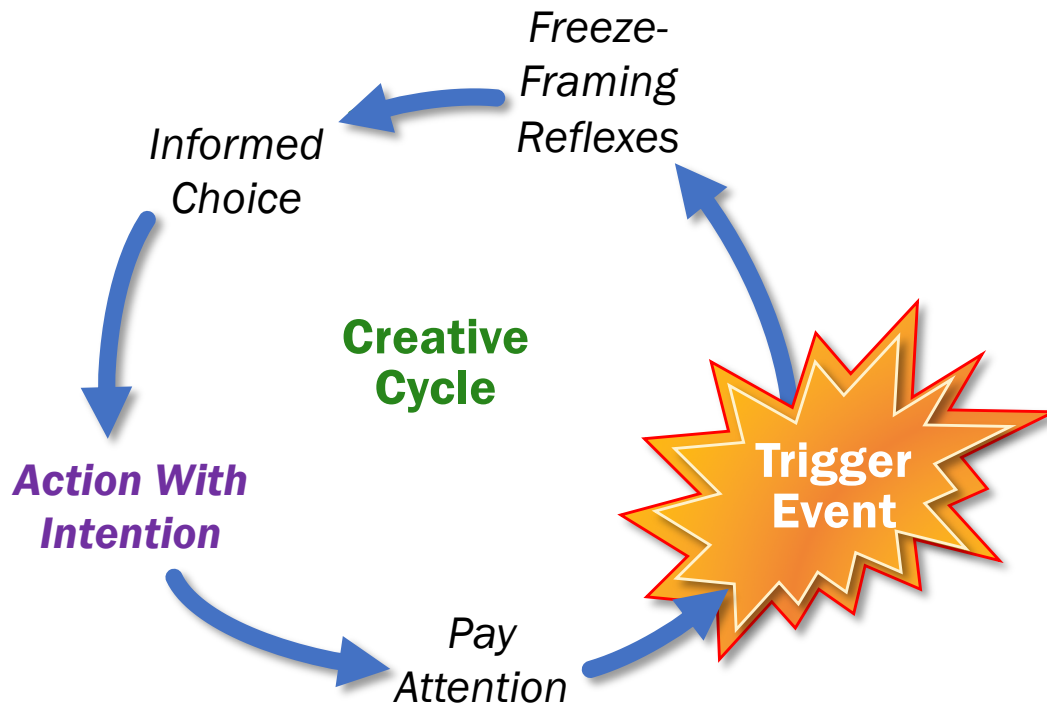
How Creative Cycles Happen: **Informed Choice**



Once you identify a range of distinctive attitudes, each with its own associated feeling state, mythology and behaviors, you select an optimal attitude to embody for the situation. The choice in this case is determined by your own sense of what is right for you and the relationship or context, not an external image of how you “should” behave.

Options are generated by intentionally altering the shape, intensity or duration of your somatic attitude.

How Creative Cycles Happen: **Action With Intention**

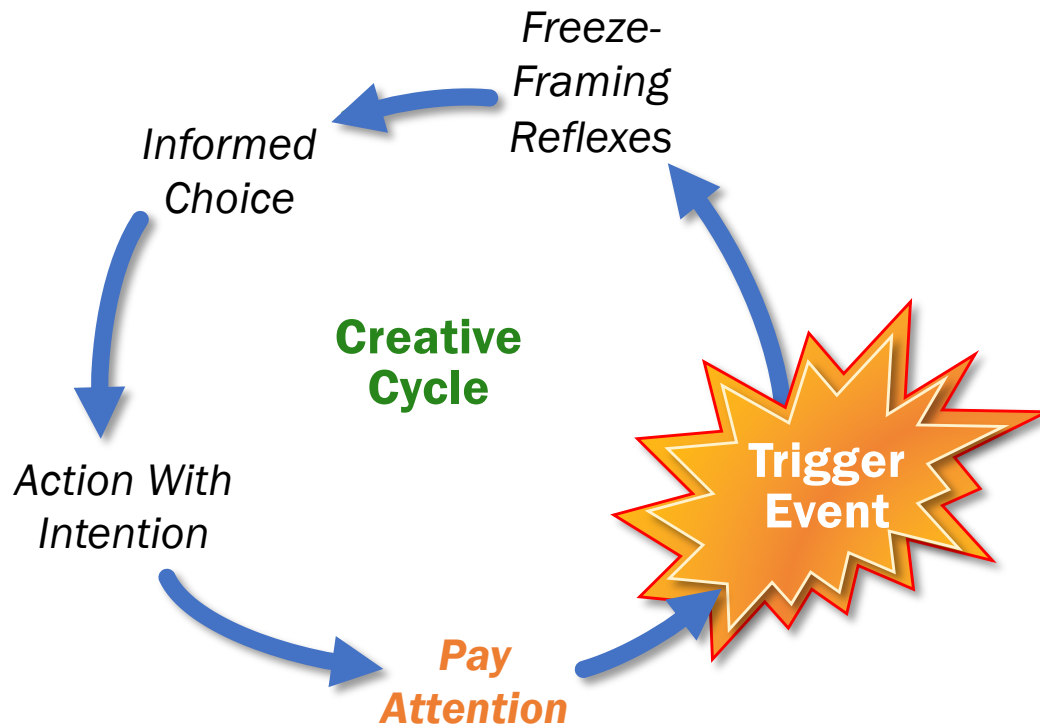


You practice extending and deepening your ability to hold a new attitude and response pattern, even under pressure.

You take action while sustaining a desired physical-emotional attitude. You behave “on purpose” rather than by autopilot.

This kind of practice and exercise is the process for re-writing the story about who you are and what’s possible in relationships, both personal and professional.

How Creative Cycles Happen: **Pay Attention**



You notice what happens next, especially the consequences of your decisions and actions. Like a surfer on the ocean, you stay alert for the next wave or interaction.

To pay attention means to be open to the senses and open to what is really happening. You observe what follows and remain ready to respond, without forcing the meaning of the events to conform to a pattern based on memory.

Indicators of Success or Progress

When using the Sensing and Shaping approach to address adaptive challenges facing individuals our aim is to realize the following:

- **Viability**—Design, response or solution that works
- **Self-Regulation**—The person demonstrates the ability to adapt and self-correct as conditions change and the going gets rough
- **Self-Generation**—The person demonstrates the capacity to invent viable new forms and behaviors and influence one's own evolution

“Do you have the discipline to be a free spirit?”

—GABRIELLE ROTH

Recommended Reading:

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