



CHAPTER 11

SETTLING AND SAFEGUARDING YOUR BODY

*“Breathe. Let go. Remind yourself that this very moment
is the only one you know you have for sure.”*

OPRAH WINFREY

*“Healing is a practice. It’s not a one-time thing or an idea. If I
get up and do a bunch of exercises and repeat them, over time my
muscles will get stronger. Healing is a practice just like that.”*

MARNITA SCHROEDL

Few skills are more essential than the ability to settle your body. If you can settle your body, you are more likely to be calm, alert, and fully present, no matter what is going on around you. A settled body enables you to harmonize and connect with other bodies around you, while encouraging those bodies to settle as well. Gather together a large group of unsettled bodies—or assemble a group of bodies and then unsettle them—and you get a mob or a riot. But bring a large group of settled bodies together and you have a potential movement—and a potential force for tremendous good in the world. A calm, settled body

is the foundation for health, for healing, for helping others, and for changing the world.

I'm a therapist by profession. I've been trained by many wise elders and other professionals; I've earned a Master of Social Work degree; I know a variety of practices such as talk therapy, EMDR, and multiple forms of healing touch. If you paid me to, I could discuss your inner child, your internal archetypes, your ego and superego and id, Gottman's seven principles for a happy relationship, or any of a hundred other concepts therapists use. Yet none of these has much to do with why clients come to me, or how our work together helps them heal.

Although they don't always realize it, people visit my office to be with my settled, regulated nervous system. At first, clients come in with dysregulated nervous systems. Over time, their repeated contact with my nervous system helps their nervous systems settle. This does not happen through a process of mirroring, or cognitive training, or verbal communication. What takes place is energetic, chemical, biological—a synching of vibrations and energies. My nervous system does not model the way; over time, it helps other nervous systems access the same infinite source that mine does.

My settled nervous system isn't an accident of birth. It's partly the result of my training, my education, my experience, and my long-standing and mindful self-care.

But I didn't wrestle or mold or manage an unsettled nervous system into a settled one. Over time, I learned to access a settledness that is always and already present. I usually call it the Infinite Source, but it doesn't require a name, or an explanation, or a belief.

This settling of nervous systems, and this connection to a larger Source, is vital to healing.

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If you're white, you may discover that when you can settle and manage your body, you won't feel a need to manage Black ones—or a need to ask Black ones to manage yours. You'll also be better able to manage, challenge, and disrupt white-body supremacy.

If you're Black, you may find that when you can settle and manage your body, you'll be better equipped to not internalize the standards of white-body supremacy. You'll also be more able to challenge it through organized and sustained resistance.

If you're a police officer, you may realize that when you can settle and manage your body, your job will be less stressful. In addition, many of the bodies you encounter will seem less threatening. Some of the law-abiding people you serve and protect may also feel less threatened by you. In addition, you may get sick or injured less often.

In each of these cases, you will discover that when you have regard for your own body, it is easier to have regard for other bodies.

Learning to settle your body and practicing wise and compassionate self-care are not about reducing stress; they're about increasing your body's ability to *manage* stress, as well as about creating more room for your nervous system to find coherence and flow. The activities you'll learn and practice in this chapter won't make your commute shorter, your boss more empathetic, or your child less self-centered. But they will help you be less resentful or reactive when your commute, your boss, or your child makes your life more difficult. As a result, you will lose your cool less often, and stressful situations will be less likely to trigger a fight, flee, or freeze response. In turn, you may develop stronger and more respectful relationships with your fellow commuters, your boss, and your child.

Settling is *not* the same thing as healing; it is an all-important foundation for healing. A settled body invites and accepts efforts to mend it; an unsettled one tends to resist those efforts.

Unfortunately, some people learn to settle their bodies, but misuse that ability. Instead of inviting and accepting healing, they use settling in a neurotic way, to *avoid* healing. When they face a conflict or difficulty, they don't settle themselves and then work through the clean pain. Instead, they flee the situation, and then partly soothe and settle their bodies with meditation, prayer, yoga, hiking, and so on. They use settling as a form of dirty pain, rather than as support for moving through clean pain. (There is nothing wrong with any of these practices. In fact, I often recommend them. For most people, most of

the time, they are healthy. But when someone uses *any* activity to avoid growing up or facing clean pain, it's my job as a therapist to call him or her on it.)

Others, in an effort to avoid anxiety and hypervigilance, over-settle their bodies into a state that resembles depression. This, too, can be a flight response.

The activities in this chapter all focus on the body—*your* body. They are not mere exercises in relaxation, mindfulness, or learning to feel good. They are ways to better know, experience, and understand your body. They will make you more aware of your soul nerve, how and where and when it activates, and the many emotions it gives rise to. Most of all, they will help you develop the ability to settle your body whenever you wish.

Try not to view these settling activities as tools to be used only when you're under stress or feeling anxious or upset. These practices are nourishment as well as medicine. Do at least two or three of them regularly—ideally, every day or several times a week. If you like, rotate among several different ones.

Each person's body is unique, so some activities will work better for you than others. At your leisure, test each one. Use the ones that work and feel good; ignore the ones that don't. If an activity stops working or feeling good after doing it for some time, then switch things up. In all of these activities, however, you will learn to slow down, notice your body, and soothe yourself.

The central feature of any trauma response is speed. It has to be; otherwise, in the presence of genuine danger (for example, a snake about to strike), your body wouldn't be able to protect itself in time. This is why, in order to work through your trauma, you need to learn to slow down, reach for an internal resource, and fully experience your body through your soul nerve.

At other times, of course, your body needs to activate rather than settle. It's not that settling is good and activation is bad; each of us needs to be able to do either one on demand, based on the needs of the moment. With practice, these and later activities will help you settle your body *or* activate it whenever you need to.

I recommend initially practicing each activity in a quiet, comfortable, private space, as you did in earlier chapters. Once a practice has become familiar to your body, however, begin using it during difficult moments—including when other people are present.

—BODY AND BREATHING PRACTICES—

BREATHE, GROUND, AND RESOURCE, REVISITED

This is a new way to use an activity you practiced in Chapters 2 and 10.

Take a few deep breaths. Let your body relax as much as it wants to.

Think of a person, an animal, or a place that makes you feel safe and secure. Now imagine that this person or animal is beside you right now or that you are in that safe place.

Breathing naturally, let yourself experience that safety and security for about a minute.

Feel into your body. Where does it seem constricted, uncomfortable, or unwell in any way? Note each of these locations.

Pick one of these locations and focus on it. For a few seconds, let yourself fully experience the constriction or discomfort.

Then, once again, visualize the person, animal, or place that helps you feel safe and secure. Imagine you are in that place or that the person or animal is beside you. Experience the safety and security for a minute or two.

Do this for each part of your body that feels uncomfortable or constricted.

COMING INTO THE ROOM

Sit comfortably in a chair. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths.

Imagine you're floating in space. Below you, planet Earth turns slowly. Watch it turn for a few seconds.

Slowly descend until the part of the country you're in fills your field of vision. Stay directly above it, like a GPS satellite, so that it doesn't move beneath you.

Keep descending until you're looking down on whatever city, town, mountain, valley, or other area your body is sitting in right now.

Continue your descent until you're looking down at the top of the building you're in. If you're seated outdoors, descend far enough so that you can see your own body below, as if you're viewing it from a helicopter.

Keep dropping slowly and steadily, until you can see your body in detail, as if you're about ten feet above it. Observe your body's posture, any movements it makes, and the clothing it's wearing.

Slowly and smoothly, descend the rest of the way, and slip inside your body.

For a few breaths, simply be aware of being in your body. Relax and let the chair support you.

Then notice the sensation of the chair against your legs and thighs.

Then notice how it feels against your back.

Open your eyes. Orient yourself by looking around you, including behind you. Return to the here and now.

BODY SCAN

Sit comfortably in a chair. Take a few breaths, feeling the air move in and out of your body. Close your eyes.

Notice the experience of the chair against your back. Notice the sensation of your feet on the ground.

Starting with the top of your head, slowly scan your body from top to bottom. Pay attention to each part as you slowly move your attention downward. Notice where there is pain or discomfort, where there is constriction, and where there is relaxation or expansiveness.

First move slowly down your forehead, then through your face, then down your neck.

Follow your attention as it moves across the top of your shoulders and onto your shoulder blades, then down your torso and into and down your arms.

Continue to descend down your torso and arms, through your hips and buttocks, and into your hands. Experience your attention spreading into your fingers and then out your fingertips.

Continue moving down your legs, through your knees, and down to your ankles. Pay attention to your major joints—your ankles, knees, hips, wrists, elbows, and shoulders. These are spots where energy often gets blocked. (If you feel the urge to move any of these, feel free to do so.)

Follow your attention into your feet, then down into your toes, then into the bottoms of your feet.

Take a moment to notice where your soles meet the ground.

For a pleasant and effective variation of this body scan, practice it standing in the shower, as you let the water surround and cleanse you.