

Radical Openness Handout 3.1

Changing Social Interactions by Changing Physiology

- Our bodies are hardwired with a special regulatory system for social safety. This system calms and relaxes us.
- We have another regulatory system for defending against threats and for exciting us. This system alerts and arouses us.
- When the social safety system is activated, we feel open, flexible, and relaxed; we are more likely to want to explore, play, and socialize—it's our friendly state.
- When our social safety system is on, our defensive system is off or muted. We can't be relaxed and angry, afraid and content, or excited and calm at the same time.
- The good news is that when stressed or anxious, we can turn our social safety system on and our threat-emotion system off by doing certain behaviors that our brain naturally links to safety.
- Thus, we don't have to *think* our way out of anxiety; we can *do* our way out.
- So if you want to feel less tension, let your body do the work!

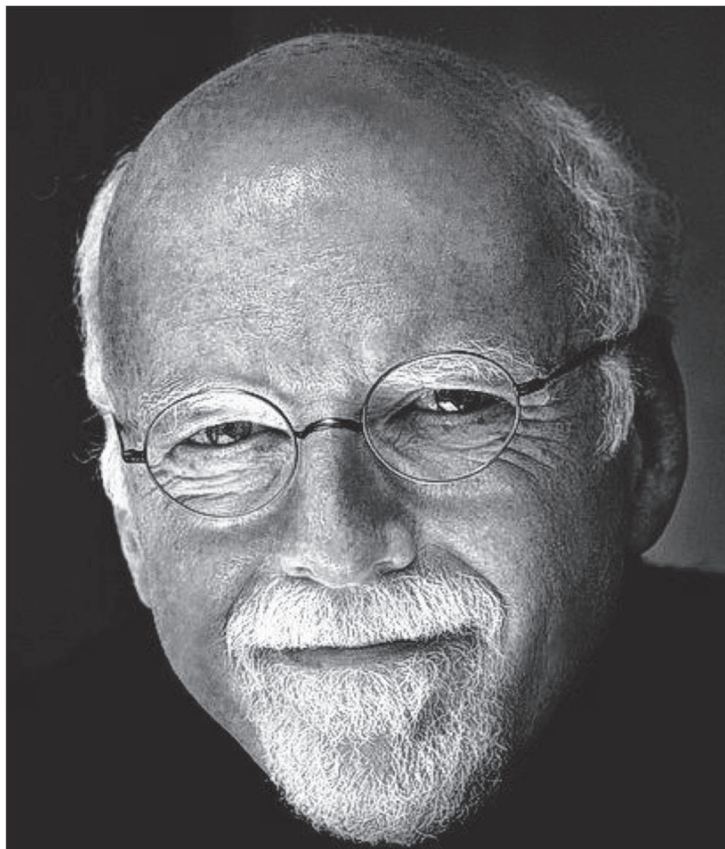
Practice These Skills

- **Use the Big Three + 1.** Lean back in your chair, take a slow deep breath, make a closed-mouth smile, and use an eyebrow wag.
- **Use big expansive gestures with open hands** rather than keeping your arms and hands close to your body.
- **Move your facial muscles.** When threatened or tense, our facial muscles naturally become frozen and we lose our ability to flexibly communicate via facial expressions. By deliberately moving our facial muscles, we send safety signals to our brain. Facial movement tells our brain, "I must be safe because I am not trying to mask my inner feelings." In front of a mirror at home or elsewhere, when alone, practice tensing, releasing, and stretching your facial muscles. Exaggerate your facial expressions. Make your eyebrows go up and down; then scrunch your eyes together; pucker your mouth; then stretch your lips as wide as they can go, open your mouth and eyes as wide as they can go, stick out your tongue as far as it can go; then raise your eyebrows and stretch all of these muscles as much as you can at the same time. Now close your eyes as hard as you can and scrunch up all of the muscles in your face, and tense them all as hard as you can—then release the tension. Tense and release as many different facial muscles as you can—see if you can find all of them! Repeat whenever possible throughout your day.
- **Deliberately breathe more deeply and slowly; use long, slow exhalations.** Purposely exhale longer than normal. Slow your rate of breathing to six breaths per minute; on inbreath, focus on raising the belly, not the chest.
- **Deliberately tense and relax large muscle groups.** Start with your toes and feet, then to legs and torso, then to your arms and neck, and then to your facial muscles. Tense each set of muscles, hold the tension, then slowly release the tension and notice the difference.

- **Use touch, deep pressure, massage, and hugs.** Practice touching or hugging soft objects (furry pets, stuffed toys, pillows); lightly stroke your face and neck; massage the muscles of your face, scalp, and neck. Locate the spot directly beneath the beginning of each eyebrow in the uppermost corner of each eye socket; use both thumbs to press this spot in an upward direction, and notice what happens. Wrap yourself tightly in blankets or towels (swaddling). Place a small heavy beanbag or sandbag over your forehead and thighs—notice what happens. Hug yourself by crossing both arms over your upper chest until your hands can reach your upper back, then rock your body slowly back and forth. Rub your tummy in a clockwise direction. Wrap a hot water bottle in a towel, lie on the floor, and place a cushion under each knee, then place the hot water bottle over your belly—notice what happens. Gently but firmly press the space in between the webbing of your thumb and pointer finger—notice what happens. Purchase a commercially available massaging machine or vibrating/massaging chair. Take a warm bath or shower; use the jet sprays in hot tubs to massage your back and neck. If you have a partner or friend to practice with, ask for a neck or foot massage; ask for a hug and squeeze firmly—practice hugging each day, if possible. Lie down on the floor and allow your friend to gently support your head in his or her hands; then, with your fingers, gently rub the point directly above the bridge of your nose adjacent to each eyebrow. Experiment with using the sensation of touch—be creative—and incorporate touch into each day.
- **Chewing and eating food.** When anxious, our bodies are tense and ready for action. Our brain associates eating and chewing with resting and digesting, not fleeing or fighting. Chewing moves the muscles of the face linked to social safety. It is difficult to swallow when really upset; chewing and swallowing food naturally calms the body. Look for your favorite calming foods (for example, milk and cookies) and incorporate these into everyday living. Carry sugar-free chewing gum, sweets, or snack bars with you. When stressed, rather than restricting intake, start chewing and moving those facial muscles.
- **Hearing—music and the human voice.** When stressed, use music that you find calming or soothing and/or recordings of the human voice that you find calming to activate your social safety system. Avoid listening to music that is arousing, disturbing, or exciting.
- **Vision—gazing at pictures of loved ones, pets, or landscapes.** You can trigger your social safety system by gazing at pictures linked to warmth, expansion, or a sense of peace. These might be pictures of a friend, your child or grandchild, a favorite pet, or your partner in a place that brings back warm memories. Use pictures you can carry with you and look at when you feel threatened or tense. As you gaze, breathe deeply and notice what happens.

Radical Openness Handout 3.2

Closed-Mouth Cooperative Smile



Radical Openness Handout 3.3

Main Points for Lesson 3: Activating Social Safety

1. Overcontrolled individuals are biotemperamentally (genetically) threat-sensitive, making it more likely for them to unintentionally carry defensive moods and behaviors (hunting dogs, shields, and swords) with them into social situations that can lead to social ostracism.
2. One can naturally improve social connectedness by changing one's physiology by activating the brain's social safety system.
3. Effective emotional expression is always *context*-dependent—that is, sometimes not expressing an emotion is the most effective way to manage a given situation.

Radical Openness Worksheet 3.A

Activating Social Safety

Look for opportunities to practice activating your social safety system. Describe the event you chose.

Observe and describe any hunting dogs, shields, or swords that you may have wanted to bring into a social situation—for example, frowning when entering a room, pretending to feel okay when not, and so forth.

Place a checkmark in the box next to each strategy you practiced, and in the spaces following each strategy, briefly describe your emotional experience, and rate the intensity of the emotion or body tension before and after trying the strategy (using a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 signifying low intensity, 5 moderate intensity, and 9 or 10 extremely intense).

- ☐ Adjusted my body posture by using the Big Three + 1—leaned back, took a deep breath, made a closed-mouth smile, and used an eyebrow wag.

Intensity before _____ Intensity after _____

- ☐ Used big gestures with open hands rather than keeping my arms and hands close to my body.

Intensity before _____ Intensity after _____

- ☐ Deliberately practiced exaggerating facial expressions and moving facial muscles.

Intensity before _____ Intensity after _____

- ☐ Deliberately slowed my breath and used long slow exhalations.

Intensity before _____ Intensity after _____

- ☐ Deliberately tensed and relaxed large muscle groups in my body.

Intensity before _____ Intensity after _____

- ☐ Used touch, deep pressure, hugs, and massage.

Intensity before _____ Intensity after _____

- ☐ Ate calming food(s) or chewed gum.

Intensity before _____ Intensity after _____

- ☐ Used hearing by listening to soothing music and soothing voices.

Intensity before _____ Intensity after _____

- ☐ Used vision by gazing at pictures of loved ones, pets, or landscapes.

Intensity before _____ Intensity after _____

Describe other social safety activation skills you used.
