

Taking the Hit as a Gift – from chapter 11 in *The Life We Are Given*

By George Leonard and Michael Murphy

Rarely have we received the guidance on dealing with life's sudden hits, those misfortunes that come without warning. This exercise will allow you to experience an effective way of dealing with them. More than that, it will show you to *gain* energy from negative happenings, how to turn a hit into a gift, perhaps even a life-transforming experience.

Unexpected blows come in many varieties, from the merely bothersome to the profound. Say you own an antique gold watch handed down from a grandparent, a watch you intend to bequeath to one of your grandchildren. One day, on a boat, you take the watch out to show a friend; it slips from your hand and drops into deep water. Or say you and your spouse are driving to a wedding along a lonely road, running a little late. Suddenly there is a loud sound and your car lurches to a halt; a tire has blown out. Or say you've worked long and hard to complete a report for your supervisor. You give it to her on Friday afternoon. On Monday morning, she walks into your office holding the report. You smile inwardly, anticipating praise. She throws it on your desk: "This is chaos. It makes no sense at all." OR say your spouse comes home one day wearing a strange, pained expression. "I haven't had the nerve to tell you before, but I have to tell you now that I've been having an affair with your best friend."

Our most common responses to such unfortunate happenings tend to make things worse:

Immediate counterattack. Fighting back reflexively. "Whad'ya mean 'chaos'? This is a damned good report!" Or you might get out of the disabled car and kick the offending tire. Such responses generally only strengthen and solidify the problem.

Whining, playing the victim's role. "Oh no! Not *again!* Why do things like this always happen to me?" The victim's role is not only unattractive, it's self-defeating, inviting misfortune without redemption, forfeiting all chances of an eventual positive outcome.

Denial. "This doesn't bother me. I can handle it. I don't feel a thing." While it's tempting to steel yourself against the vicissitudes of life, to turn off or control your feelings, this path is a particularly dangerous one. If you practice turning off your feelings long enough, you might get too good at it. You might become so insensitive that you honestly don't have the faintest idea that, for instance, you're hurting your young daughter's feelings by laughing at one of her sincere questions; you have to be aware of your feelings to be aware of others' feelings. What's more, as numerous studies suggest, blocked emotions can be unhealthy for the heart and the rest of the body.

There are better ways. We propose a response to sudden hits that involves fully experiencing and acknowledging strong feelings and using the energy of those feelings to handle the situation at hand – with plenty of power left over for further good works. In the following exercise, you'll have your partner create a representation of a sudden hit by sneaking up behind you, grabbing your wrist, and shouting. You need only enough impact to make you jump, to lose your center. So let your partner know how jumpy you are; maybe you'll need only a very mild startle to do the job.

Start by standing with feet about as far apart as the width of your shoulders, eyes open and soft. Balance and center. When you're ready, let your arms swing out from the sides of your body to a forty-five-degree angle. This is your partner's signal to walk up stealthily behind you and grab either your right or left wrist with both of his or her hands while simultaneously giving a shout. The grab should be sudden and firm, but *should not pull you off balance in any direction*. Your partner should continue to hold your wrist firmly while you process the experience.

Be totally aware of how the sudden hit affected you. Speaking aloud in a clear voice, describe exactly what is going on within you. Specify exactly where in your body each feeling or sensation is located. Don't look at your partner as you speak. Resist the temptation to point the finger of your free hand at different parts of your body. Use words only and be as specific as possible. For example: "When you grabbed me, I jumped and blinked both eyes. My heart seemed to jump up in my throat. Now my throat feels a little dry. I can feel the pressure of your hands on my right wrist. My left shoulder is a little high. My abdomen feels tight. My breathing is shallower than usual."

Keep speaking until you have nothing more to say. At this point, you might note that most of the conditions you've described have melted away. Many people discover that merely becoming aware of an imbalance tends to correct it.

The second part of the exercise requires a change of context. Consider the fact that this sudden shock, by startling you and knocking you off center, has *added* energy to your body and your psyche. In acknowledging and specifying your feelings, you've avoided fighting back reflexively, whining about your fate, or denying your feelings. Your adrenal glands have shot a hormonal cocktail into your bloodstream. As a result of being startled, your entire nervous system has come to the alert. You've been shaken out of whatever lethargy might have previously held you in check. Now you can choose what positive uses you wish to make of the extra energy that is yours to use.

Take a series of deep breaths. Move up and down rhythmically by bending and unbending your knees. Become aware of the extra energy you now possess. Even the tight grip on your wrist is giving you energy. Begin moving around with a feeling of power. Your partner may be having trouble holding you. In any case, ask your partner to release your wrist and walk around the room expansively, arms open. Ask yourself if you have more energy now than when you started the exercise.

Being grabbed by the wrist is not, of course, the same as being confronted by some unexpected blow in your life. But this exercise guides you toward an alternative way of dealing with sudden hits of many types and many degrees of severity. Say your supervisor

throws your report on your desk and says, “This is chaos!” You might try not shouting back, “What do you mean, ‘chaos?’” This is a damned good report. “What’s more—” That might well make matters worse. Don’t whine and complain; playing the victim is, in many ways, a losing game. Most of all, don’t deny your feelings. Say to yourself, for example, “Boy, I felt that like a blow to the solar plexus. My mouth feels dry. I feel something like anger throbbing at my temples and in the back of my head.” Or, if you know your supervisor well enough and have established a certain openness in the expression of feelings, you might even speak your feelings aloud. Just *your* feelings. Don’t try to lay blame on the supervisor. Then consider the possibility that this sudden blow has given you the energy with which you and your supervisor, working together, can come up with an even better report. And note how energized you feel. This extra energy can be put to use in many ways.

The particulars of responding to each sudden hit vary, but the pattern is always the same: Fully experience and acknowledge your feelings by localizing them in your body. Be aware of the infusion of extra energy caused by the hit. Put this energy to use for some positive purpose.

“Even from misfortune, great power can flow into you.”

George Leonard, *The Life We Are Given*