

power objects, postures, clothes & prayers: all ways to facilitate change

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*"I will love you like a wind,
like a man stitching a skin
together like a winter coat.
Like a man sitting in meditation
and repairing a cracking spirit.
Like a man in love with a leaf,
a cloud, a flame, a temple.
Like a man on fire
running in the wilderness
shouting for sheer joy."*

From the poem "A blessing (the way)" in the book "A shaman's songbook" by Norman Moser

"Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work"

Thomas Edison

How can we effectively help ourselves to make changes in our lives? This is such an important subject. Pretty much all my work as a doctor and psychotherapist involves supporting people to do this ... to ease distress, to live more healthily, to be more who & how we want to be, to flourish more in our lives ... maybe even to *"run in the wilderness shouting for sheer joy"*! In an earlier post *"Self-control, conscientiousness, grit, emotion regulation, willpower – whatever word you use, it's sure important to have it"* I've described the extraordinary benefits achievable through increased self-control & willpower and in *"Building willpower: the eight pillars"* I've listed a sequence of evidence-based ways to follow through on key changes we want to make in our lives. To best use the ideas in today's post, you'll probably benefit most if you work your way through the first three steps (or similar suggestions) in the *"Building willpower"* post. In other words, please choose a goal that you genuinely want to work towards yourself (not something that you're choosing because of pressure from others). It should be of real importance to you ... not impossibly hard, but definitely stretching. Set it up skilfully ... and think about implementation intentions too. I'm a huge fan of implementation intentions – see, for example, the way that they dramatically improved outcomes in the recent paper *"Making self-help more helpful: A randomized controlled trial of the impact of augmenting self-help materials with implementation intentions"*. In fact this blog post could accurately be seen as exploring creative, interesting & effective ways of working with implementation intentions. So I'd like to enlarge on four tools that can help in this process of being, feeling and acting more how we really want to. A little tongue in cheek, I've called these tools *"power objects, power postures, power clothes & power prayers"*. I'm using power in the sense in which it's often defined as the *"ability to do or act; the capability of doing or accomplishing something"*.

power objects: There's a fascinating research study entitled *"Remembering the message"* that explores the value of having some kind of physical reminder of our intentions. College students in an active intervention condition were shown a film about how easy it is to become infected with HIV if one has unprotected sex. In the control condition, similar students were shown a film about the dangers of drink driving. At the follow-up 5 to 7 weeks later, it was assessed whether the "condom encouragement" group had actually been any more careful in their sexual behaviour than the control drink driving film group. Now here's the fascinating **[Cont.]**

aspect. When all that was offered was accurate, emotive, well presented information, there was NO improvement in actual safe sex behaviour. However a subgroup of the HIV risk education students were also given a "friendship bracelet" (cost \$1.50) "to wear at all times until the follow-up session. They were explicitly told to remember the stories of the people in the video whenever they looked at the bracelet over the next few weeks to remind them of the dangers of unsafe sex." It was this bracelet-wearing subgroup who made the impressive changes in their behaviour, and the contrast with the other groups was especially relevant when alcohol was involved – in other words, in situations where one might expect it to be particularly likely that caution would be "thrown out of the window". Very interesting. This overlaps with the research findings that activating a memory of an attachment figure can encourage feelings of relaxation & security – see, for example, the paper "A picture's worth: Partner photographs reduce experimentally induced pain" – or that activating superstitions with "lucky charms" and other rituals can increase confidence & performance – see "Keep your fingers crossed!: How superstition improves performance." So the message is physical objects – "power objects" – can help us feel & act differently. Select the object because of the way it helps to remind you of attitudes, beliefs, feelings that you know could be helpful with the challenges you're likely to face. Consider boosting the wanted attitudes & feelings by thinking about, looking at, touching, re-connecting to the object and reminding yourself of what it implies and why it can be helpful. Lots of room for creativity here!

power postures: Don't get me started! There is a whole field of relevant research. Of course it's obvious that how we feel affects our facial expression, our posture, our movement. Now, there's a wealth of current and emerging research showing that how we hold our face, how we position our body, how we move, powerfully affects how we think, feel & act. It even rapidly affects our biochemistry - see, for example, the 2010 paper "Power posing: Brief nonverbal displays affect neuroendocrine levels and risk tolerance" with its abstract reading "Humans and other animals express power through open, expansive postures, and they express powerlessness through closed, contractive postures. But can these postures actually cause power? The results of this study confirmed our prediction that posing in high-power nonverbal displays (as opposed to low-power nonverbal displays) would cause neuroendocrine and behavioral changes for both male and female participants: High-power posers experienced elevations in testosterone, decreases in cortisol, and increased feelings of power and tolerance for risk; low-power posers exhibited the opposite pattern. In short, posing in displays of power caused advantaged and adaptive psychological, physiological, and behavioral changes, and these findings suggest that embodiment extends beyond mere thinking and feeling, to physiology and subsequent behavioral choices. That a person can, by assuming two simple 1-min poses, embody power and instantly become more powerful has real-world, actionable implications (see <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/6461.html> for a fuller description)." I have written extensively about this – see "Embodied cognition: posture & feelings", "Embodied cognition: muscle & willpower" and "Embodied cognition: what to do" with its comment: "Do it now! We can respond constructively to this increasing understanding of body-mind connections right now! How we hold our bodies now is affecting how we feel. Our facial expression now affects our thinking. How we move changes how we experience ourselves. How do I want to be at the moment – determined & strong? friendly & interested? happy & appreciative? peaceful & relaxed? We can start right now by allowing our posture, our face, our movement to have these qualities. Emotional states are complex interconnections of feelings, thoughts, images, memories, body states, impulses and behaviours. Altering one aspect of this mix has knock-on effects on all other aspects. Our bodies are a great, easily alterable doorway into this whole interlinked system - and wherever we are, we have our bodies. Wherever we are, we can make choices that affect how we want to feel, think and act ... The research findings detailed in "Embodied cognition: posture & feelings" and "Embodied cognition: muscle & willpower" (and in subsequently emerging publications) open up a whole, exciting avenue of applications – in therapy, in work environments, in our personal lives – both to combat psychological distress more effectively and also to grow our wellbeing & how we function in the world." **[Cont.]**

power clothes: Linking what I've written about "*power objects*" & "*power postures*" is some of the emerging research on how what we wear affects how we feel. The abstract of the paper "*Enclothed cognition*" (published this year) reads "*We introduce the term "enclothed cognition" to describe the systematic influence that clothes have on the wearer's psychological processes. We offer a potentially unifying framework to integrate past findings and capture the diverse impact that clothes can have on the wearer by proposing that enclothed cognition involves the co-occurrence of two independent factors – the symbolic meaning of the clothes and the physical experience of wearing them.*" See too the linked article "*Put on your power!*" with its remark "*So, how can we use the enclothed cognition findings to our benefit? What kind of symbolic meaning does each article of clothing in your closet hold for you? Do your loafers remind you of a logical, erudite lawyer? Do your 4-inch high heels make you think of a confident woman walking down Wall Street? Does your leather bomber jacket make you think of a rebel? Perhaps you can choose to make the monotonous daily task of getting dressed more fun and work to your advantage. Try mindfully incorporating the findings discovered from the enclothed cognition experiments to intentionally shape your subjective psychological experience and performance each day, or on special days say, when you have a job interview, a date, or need to take a test. Here's one way to go about it: Upon waking up in the morning, take a moment to check-in with yourself and ask, "What do I want to feel like today?" Once you name the intended feeling state or adjective (e.g., friendly, fierce, confident, sexy, composed, loving, and so on), you're halfway there. Next, ask yourself, "What article(s) of clothing make me feel (fierce, confident, sexy, composed, loving ...)? What color(s) make me feel that way?" Once you've identified the article(s) of clothing that symbolizes the desired psychological state, march on over to your closet (no doubt, you'll have a new pep to your step) and pull out those pieces. If you're a girl, don't stop with just your clothes. Go all out: do your makeup, hair, and adorn yourself with the accessories that accurately match – for you – the desired feeling state that you chose." Mm ... I think I might go easy on the makeup & I have less hair to play with than I used to, but you get the point.*

power prayers: Power "*prayers*" or power "*phrases*" are words we can use to inspire ourselves. This can involve many different effective formats – for example, writing for some minutes about chosen subjects can affect our feelings & behaviours for many weeks afterwards; having reminder cards we read can boost us as well; meditating or using imagery on particular themes can also be useful; as too can internally noting helpful words or phrases. Subjects can involve self-compassion, mindfulness, kindness & empathy for others, reminders/imagery of how we want to act, reconnecting to areas, strengths & values of particular personal importance, reframing & reappraisal, and so on. This is extensive territory, but I'll mention four areas in a little more detail. In the sequence of three posts beginning with "*Therapeutic writing & speaking: inspiration from values*", I describe how writing for 10 minutes or so about one of your most important values (e.g. kindness or courage or honesty or determination, etc) can really increase your stress resilience. Then in the post "*Writing - positive pasts & best futures*" I discuss the benefits of the "*Best possible selves*" exercise and the way that writing or speaking about this "*ideal future self*" can then be remembered repeatedly on a day-to-day basis. Thirdly, we know that encouraging ourselves to be self-compassionate can be helpful in many important ways. The two posts on "*Boosting self-compassion & self-encouragement by strengthening attachment security: twelve practical suggestions*" give a wealth of ideas, many of which link very well with these "*power prayers*" suggestions. Finally the classic territory explored in "*Reappraising reappraisal*" looks at many of the principles underlying the importance of encouraging ourselves see situations in more helpful ways. And of course these ideas I have mentioned about "*power objects, power postures, power clothes & power prayers*" often work best if they are combined together in personally relevant, creative ways. Have fun!
