



Personal Agility

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

By:

Mitch Saunders

I created this guide for a group that meets monthly to practice the art of developing and utilizing personal mastery. 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 emphasizes ways to embody and sustain optimal states of being while addressing dilemmas and challenges where the stakes are high and there are no easy answers.

This guide is organized in a manner that is 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.

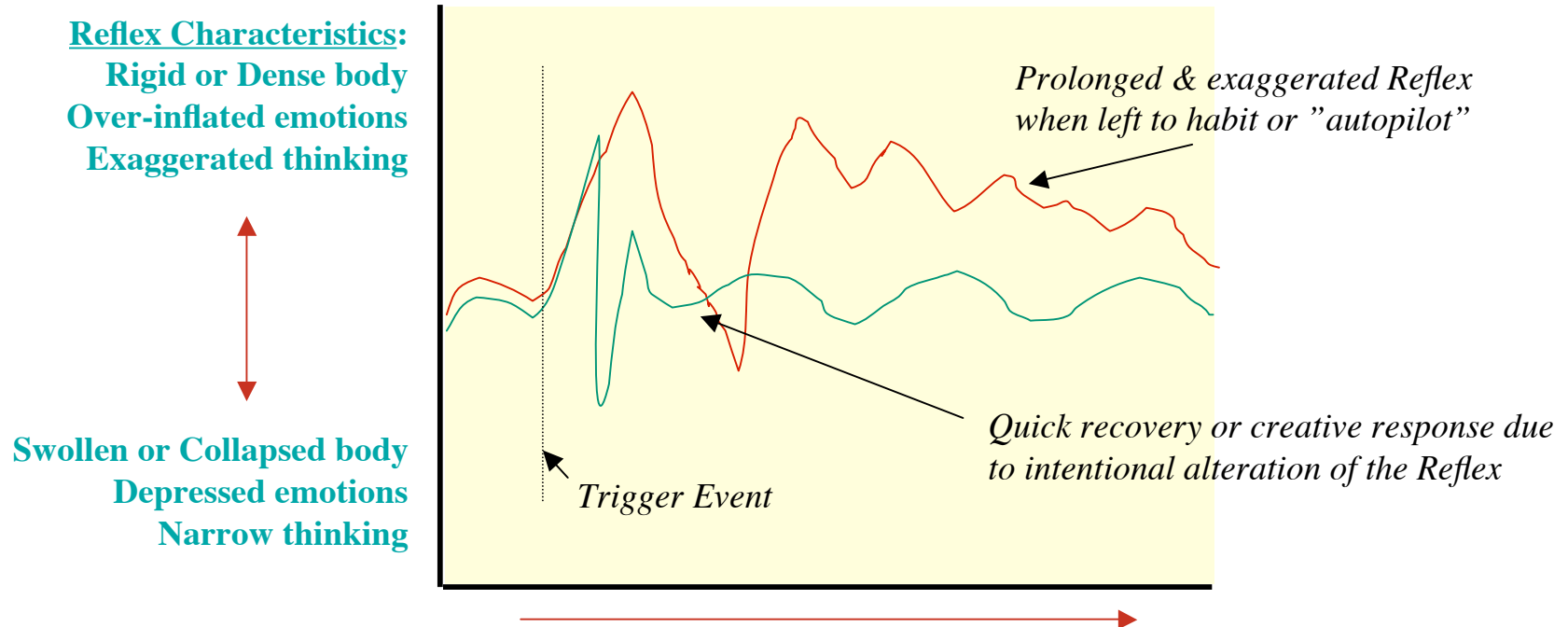
I offer this guide to encourage you to consider every moment an opportunity to reveal and grow what is most essential, soulful and alive—in yourself, your relationships, and the world around you.

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert,
repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.

Mary Oliver

It Pays To Have A Reliable Ability To Quickly Self Correct And To Access Optimal States



Time to optimal state, defined as:

- Physically "centered": enough structure to hold yourself together, with sufficient openness to take in what's going on
- Flexibility in emotional patterns
- Creative thinking

"Reflex" = your automatic (physical-emotional) response to being surprised, insulted, or challenged

You Can Influence Your Own Development

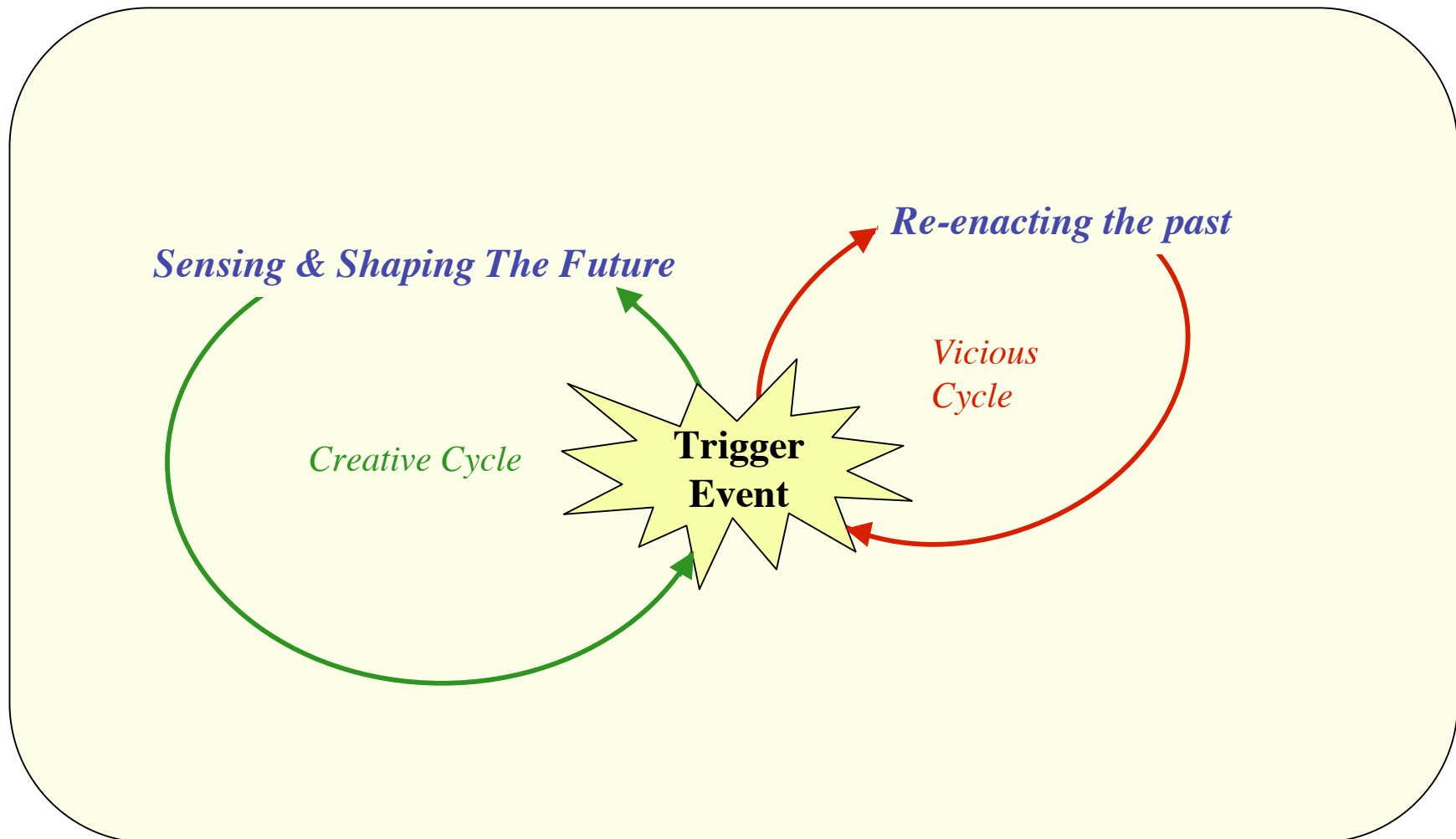
Your personal characteristics are innate/inherited, learned/conditioned, or a combination of the two. These historic influences determine, to a large extent, your future. However, this trajectory can be influenced if you know how.

The opportunity for change is amplified during times of transition. To influence who you become it is important to recognize what is ending or receding, and then sense and shape what is emerging.

Facing an unprecedented demand, challenge or dilemma—one for which there are no easy answers—is actually a powerful window of opportunity. Caught “off guard,” your body-mind swells with excitement, and is awakened for fresh possibilities. Often, these are felt as defining moments. If you know how to give these moments duration and definition, you can make room for, and cultivate new possibilities, rather than mere re-enactments of the past.

Throughout life, every stage, and each moment of encounter, offers distinctive opportunities to develop new responses. Voluntarily cultivating and enacting new behavior is key. Because your cortex will encode the new behavior with meaning, this is also how to rewrite the stories you live by.

Adaptive Dilemmas And Trigger Events Can Catalyze Creative Or Vicious Cycles



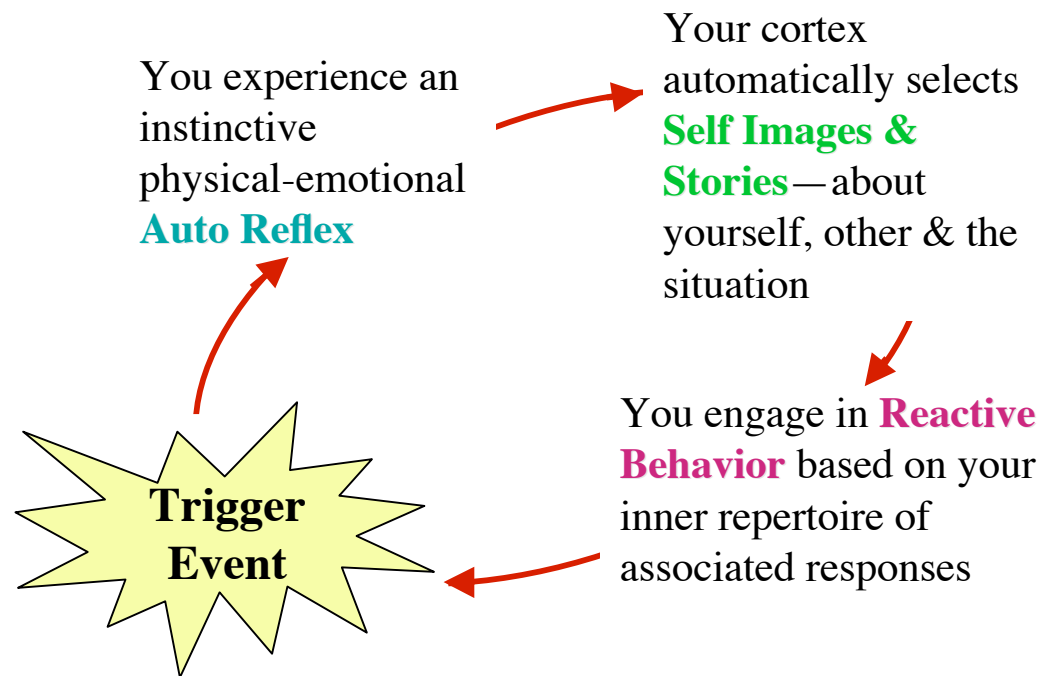
Adaptive Dilemmas And Trigger Events Can Be Momentary Or Span Years

Whenever you face surprise, challenge, or risk your body-mind must make sense of what is going on and generate an appropriate response. This is the opening.

Sometimes the demand or challenge is momentary, and other times the stimulus is ongoing. For example, you may:

- Confront unfamiliar interests, new sensibilities and capabilities, or limitations as you age;
- Advance to a level in your work where prior knowledge and experience is helpful, but insufficient;
- Discover that you or your organization is unprepared for dramatic shifts unfolding in your sector or the market;
- Find yourself in a conversation where your expectations about the relationship are met with competing expectations; or
- Experience an awakening, or a breakthrough which alters your experience of yourself, others and the world around you.

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.

Conversations As Day-To-Day Trigger Events

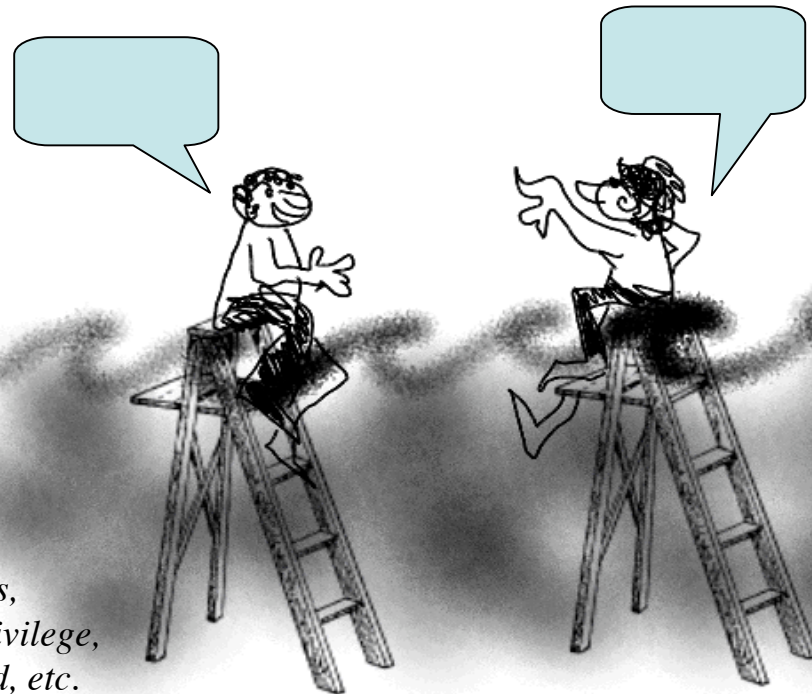
- In any conversation, two levels operate simultaneously: Content & Contract.
- We respond to information conveyed on both levels. Often reacting more to the unspoken (contract) level.
- Depending on your “wiring”, culture or personal history, certain signals and cues can evoke deeply ingrained reflexes.

Content

- *Whatever is being discussed*
- *The topic or question at hand.*

Contract

- *Underlying rules defining the relationship*
- *Unspoken agreements concerning intangibles, such as who has what kind of rank and/or privilege, which behaviors are sanctioned or prohibited, etc.*



Relationship Contracts

Though typically unexpressed and unexamined, every relationship embodies its own distinctive set of underlying contracts. Some common examples:

Emotional-Psychological

- What range of emotion and expression is welcomed or inhibited?
- Who gets to be big/small? When/how does this change?
- Who has what kind of power, status, rank, privilege?
- What (or who's) model of relationship/family/organization is running the show?
- What is the currency of exchange: appreciation, criticism, quid pro quo, gifts, meaning, profit, service, sexuality, development?

Functional

- What is the relationship's purpose?
- Who does what? When/how does this change?
- Who carries which responsibilities? How is accountability handled?
- What's included and excluded?

Ways Of Being In The World

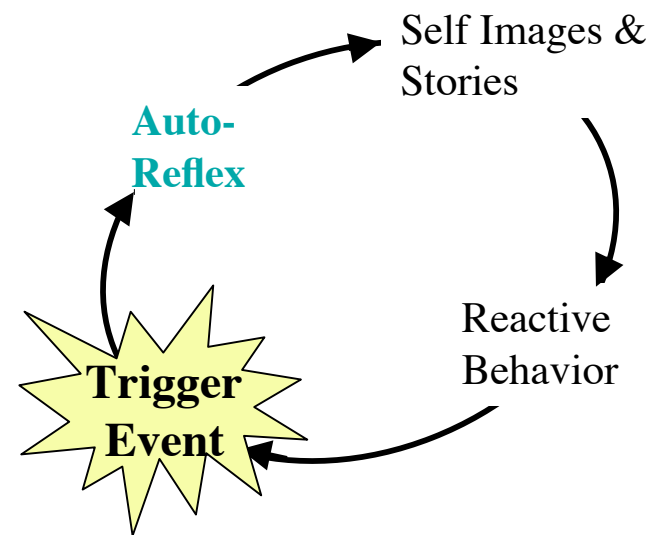
- Which is more important: Mental, Emotional, Physical, Spiritual? When/how does this change?
- How permeable are the boundaries?
- How are decisions made: fiat, consensus, democracy, random?
- What are the sanctioned or preferred ways of handling stress, conflict, change?

How Vicious Cycles Happen: The Auto Reflex

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 visible expression accompanies and expresses your internal, emotional response. All of this happens without intentional effort or awareness.

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



What interferes with listening...
is that thought jumps in very fast
with a word and all its associations,

which then goes so fast

that thought takes that to be
direct perception.

David Bohm

How Vicious Cycles Happen: **Self Images & Stories**

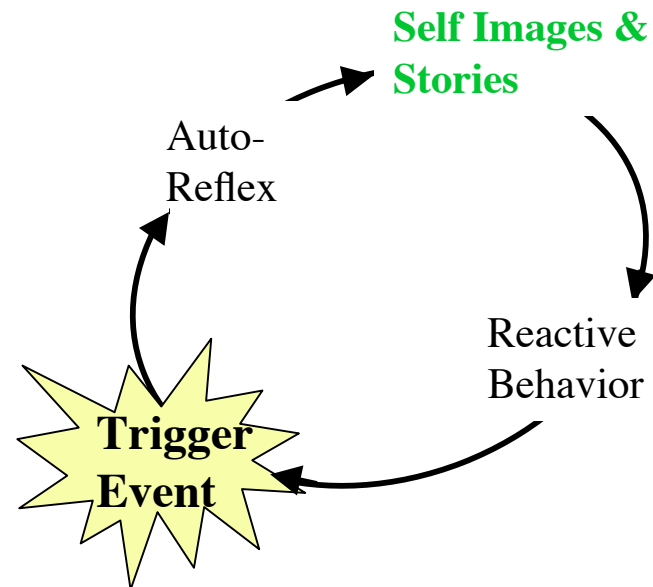
Self Images & Stories

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

Different self-images determine 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 produces results you do not intend.

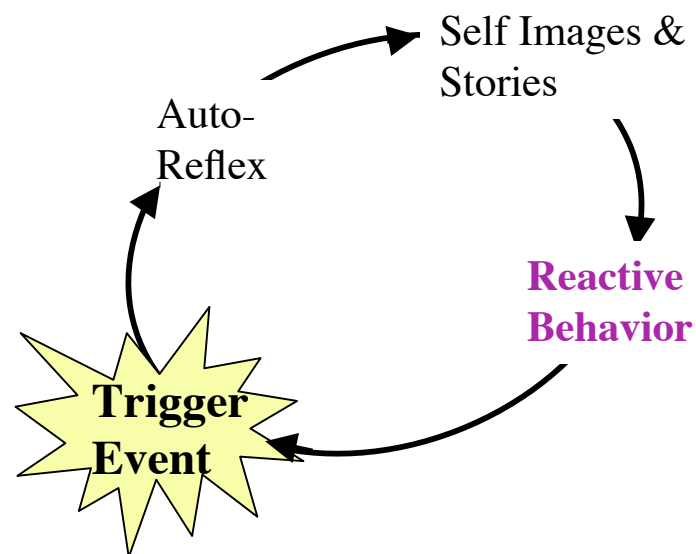


How Vicious Cycles Happen: Reactive Behavior

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 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.”



Without Informed Choice It's Easy To Lose Your Way

There is nothing inherently wrong with the fact that you or any human responds instinctively to trigger events. Humans' ability to learn from experience has been key to our survival and evolution. For example, it is a good thing that:

- while driving an automobile, when you see a ball roll out from in-between two parked cars, you brake instantaneously; or
- when you observe certain behaviors in another (e.g., promises made, but not kept), you have “second thoughts” about the other's reliability.

Both of these are situations where your response is instinctive and effective. In a matter of nanoseconds, your cortex recognizes the potential for trouble, and organizes a response, based on a host of physiological signals and cues.

Difficulties arise when your fast-cycle reaction patterns become taken-for-granted; when unexamined physical-emotional-mental processes “run the show” and there is little or no choice involved. For example, you might:

- respond with rigid fear to all conflict, or
- indiscriminately move to solve complex problems with simple solutions.

Without a practice for informed choice, the likelihood is high that in the face of trigger events you will re-enact the past; and miss the opportunity to sense and shape the future.

In the middle of the road of my life
I awoke in a dark wood
where the true way was wholly lost

Dante Alighieri

Why Focus On Somatics?

“Traditional education encourages us to live society’s image and discourages us from awakening to our deeper and more energetic impulses. We learn, but we don’t learn *how* we learn. We are not taught how to use ourselves in the learning process....

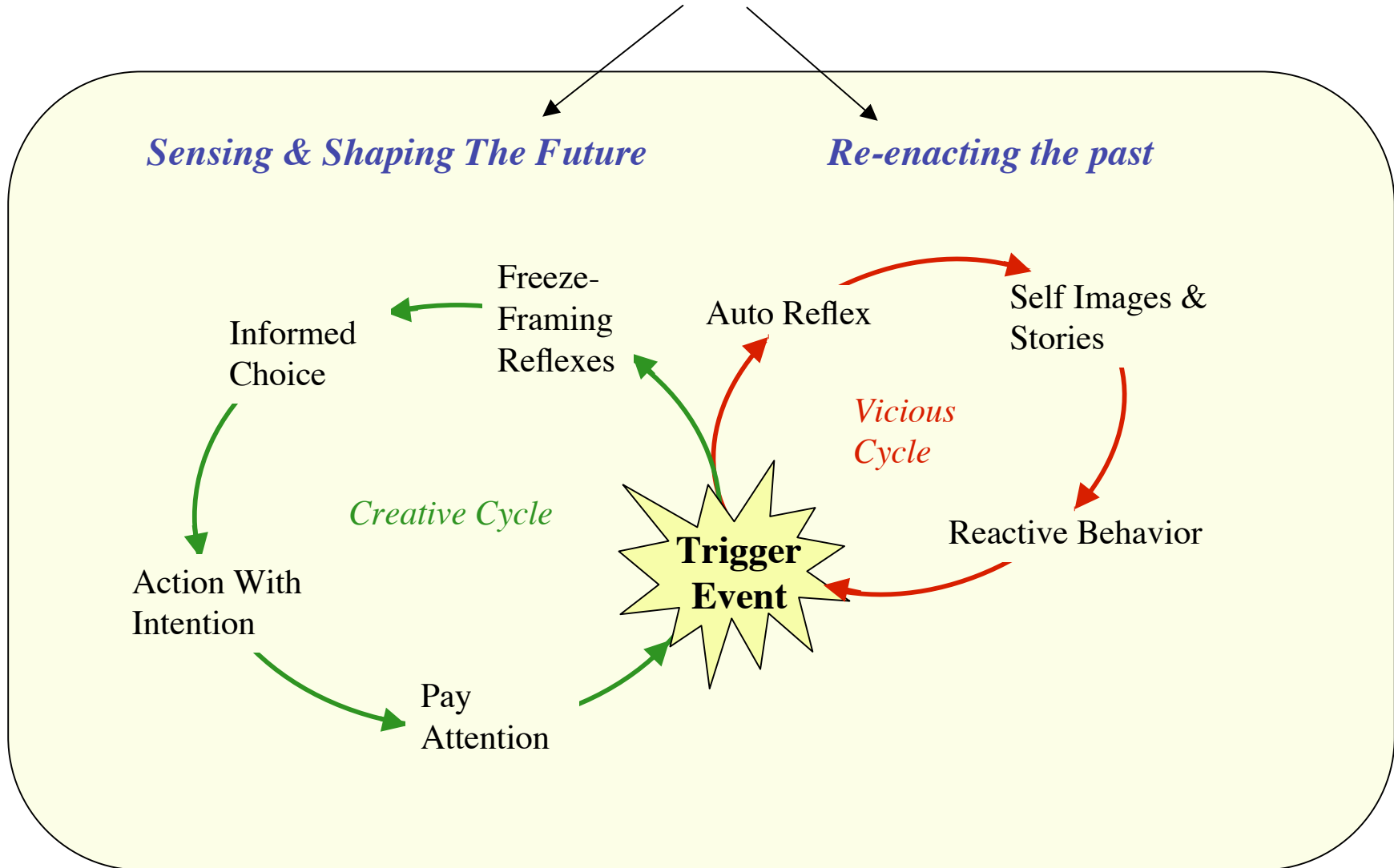
Somatics, a word derived from the Greek, defines the body as a functional, living whole rather than as a mechanical structure. Somatics does not see a split between the mind and body but views the soma as a unified expression of all that we think, feel, perceive, and express. In the art and science of 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, maturings, and countless tiny deaths that form the continuity of our life...

An education that connects us with our body would teach us the difference between what we are experiencing and what we are thinking and fantasizing about. When we are connected with our body, the present moment comes more into focus and we can then begin to make decisions from there. The life that is streaming through our body, with its rich currents of temperatures, pulsations, vibrations, swellings, and congealings, becomes our reference point for choices and responses. 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

It's Your Choice



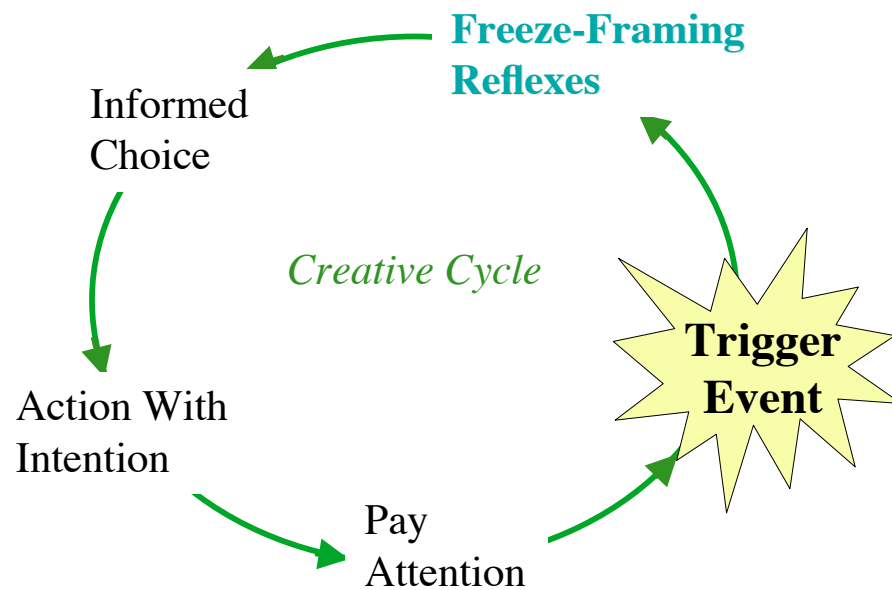
Trigger Events Present Special Opportunities

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 cooperating with what is already in progress, rather than trying to force a particular process or outcome.

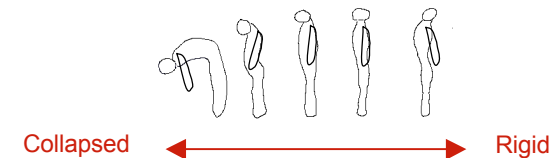
If you are able to perceive a trigger event as an opportune moment, you have choice. If you do nothing, chances are you will re-enact patterns based on the past. As an alternative, you can use intentional effort to influence reflexive responses that determine your decisions and actions. This is a powerful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

How Creative Cycles Happen: Freeze-Framing*



Freeze-Framing Reflexes

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 systemic method for using the body to form new options.

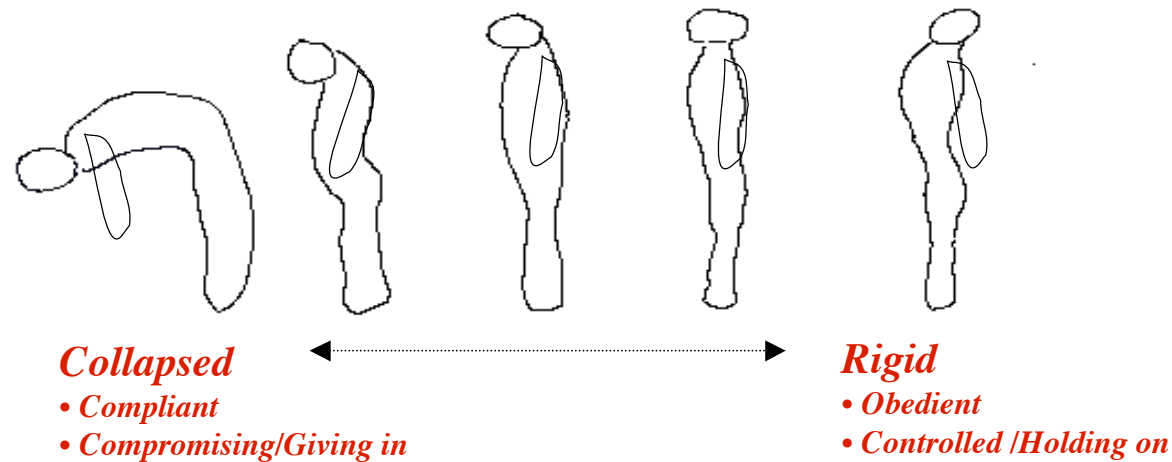
Freeze-Framing: Purposefully Influencing How You Act And Think

- Step One: *Notice* Recognize your body's reflex in its present behavior pattern.
- Step Two: *Do It More* Make a conscious choice to intensify the behavior pattern. Use small increments and pay attention. Notice how you experience yourself—distinct physical-emotional attitudes—as you embody each slight variation of the original pattern or gesture. Changing your shape makes vivid how you can influence behavior.
- Step Three: *Do It Less* Disorganize the pattern deliberately and incrementally. The dialogue between “do it more” and “do it less” begins to distinguish several physical-emotional attitudes within the original behavior pattern. Each gesture or attitude contains its own mythology and repertoire of possible responses.
- Step Four: *Assimilate* Hold and be with the new attitude, especially the most resilient variation of the original gesture or attitude. Notice the feelings and images that come up. Holding the new shape gives duration and definition to this experience and also allows you to form neural connections that will make it easier to call on this option again.
- Step Five: *Practice* Rehearse for future behavior; and practice applying the new behavior pattern. Explore what it takes to call up the less familiar options when under pressure. Through practice, intention is personalized and encoded by your body's new efforts.

Adapted from Stanley Keleman, Myth And The Body

Altering How You Experience Your Self: The Key To Shape-Shifting

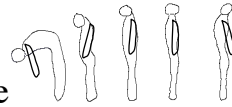
- Any pattern of behavior can be thought of as a continuum. A given reflex is just one of several options.



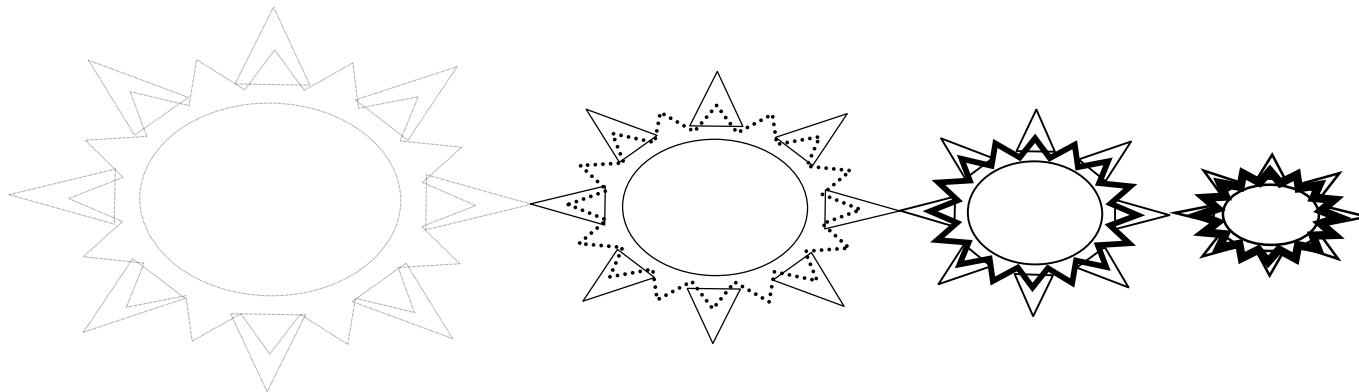
- Intentionally exaggerating and de-intensifying the original gesture slows down an automatic and potentially exaggerated reflex. Altering your pattern of response in this way develops new options. Alternative physical-emotional attitudes are obtained by “freeze-framing” each distinctive option. Now you have informed choice—to try out each option, including its associated imagery, mythology and possible range of responses.
- Learning how to voluntarily alter how you experience your self—to change your own physical-emotional state—is the key to self-knowledge, true response-ability, and intimacy.
- Changing your shape “on purpose” also makes it possible to influence your own evolution—your self image, the stories you live by, and the range of responses available to you in any situation.

Adapted from Stanley Keleman
Emotional Anatomy & Myth And The Body

What Happens On The Inside

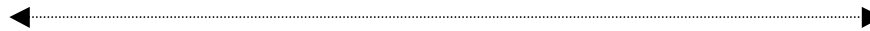


Each reflex option or physical gesture has a corresponding organization on the inside. Contraction and expansion of channels within the body affects energy movement such as blood flow and neural messaging. These channels, similar to the aperture of a camera, are the body's conduits for self awareness 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.



Collapsed

- *Compliant*
- *Compromising/Giving in*



Rigid

- *Obedient*
- *Controlled /Holding on*

Freeze-Framing: Reflection Questions

As you freeze each reflex, attitude or behavior pattern, examine its associated library of possibilities:

Feeling

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

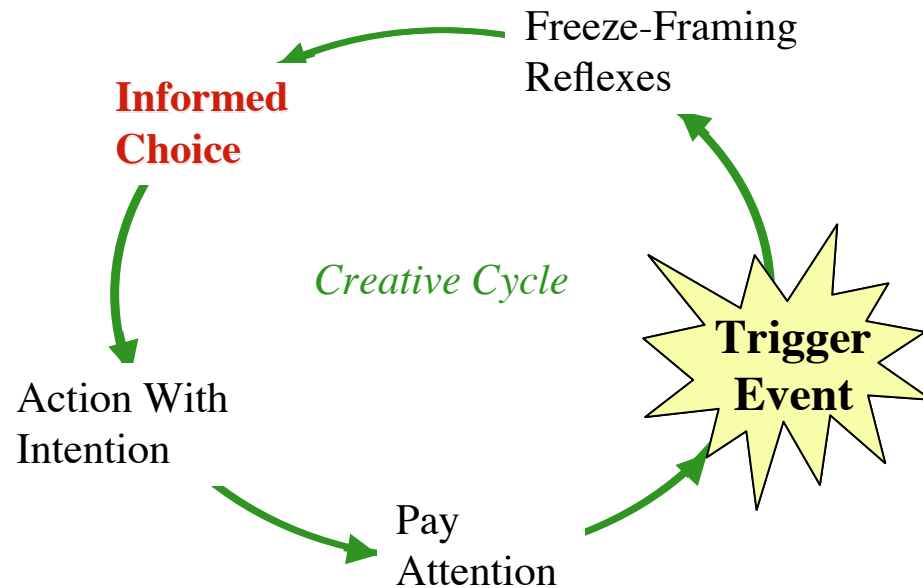
Purpose

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?

How Creative Cycles Happen: **Informed Choice**



Informed Choice

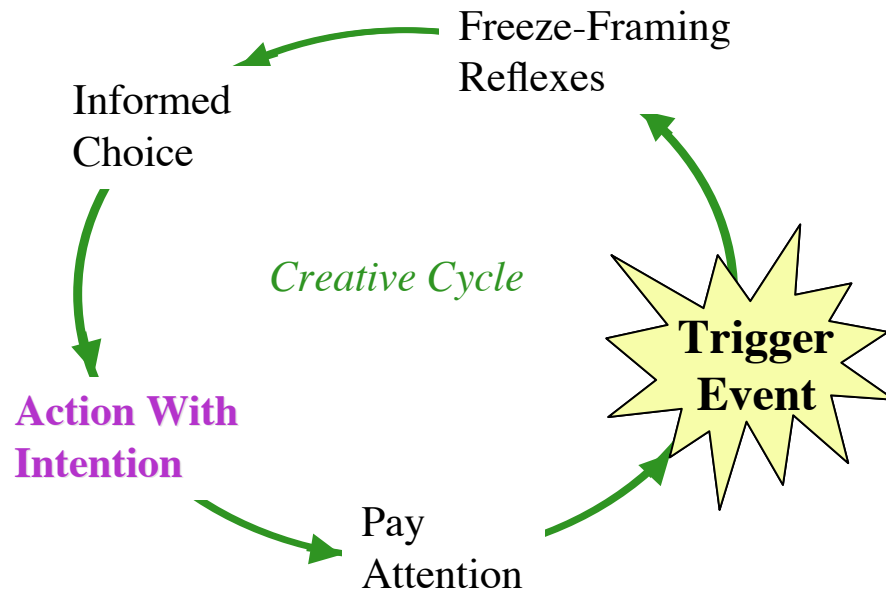
Once you identify a range of distinctive attitudes, each with its own associated feeling state, mythology and behaviors, you select an optimal attitude to embody for the situation. The choice in this case is determined by your own sense of what is right for you and the relationship or context, not an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

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

Now I become myself.
It's taken time, many years and places.
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces....

May Sarton

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

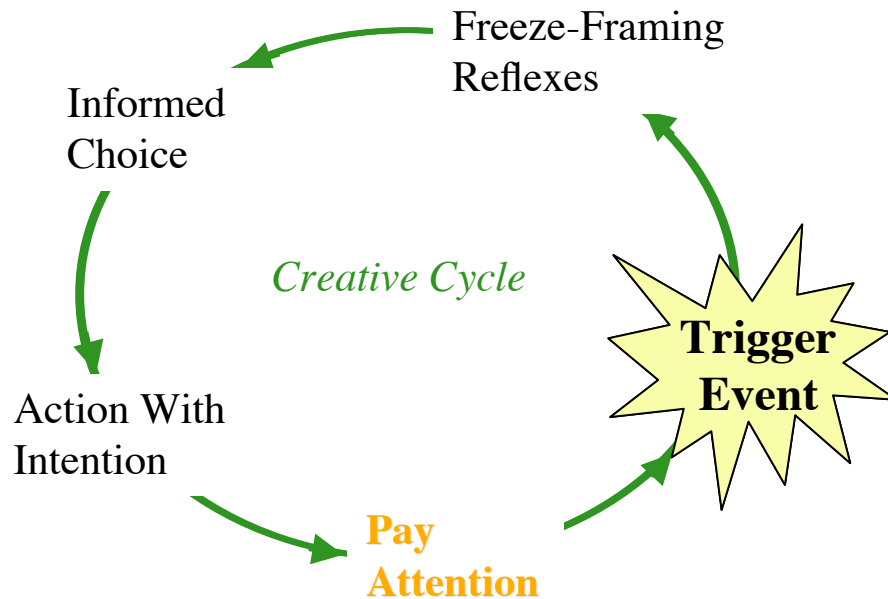


Action With Intention

You practice extending and deepening your ability to hold this new shape or attitude, even under pressure. 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.

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

How Creative Cycles Happen: **Pay Attention**



Pay Attention

You notice what happens next, especially the consequences of your decisions and actions.

To pay attention means to be open to the senses, and being open to what is really happening. “Pay attention” means that something is going on right now as a result of your actions. You observe what follows without forcing the meaning of the events to conform to a pattern based on memory.

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

Gabrielle Roth

Recommended Reading

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