

A person is silhouetted against a bright sunset, standing on a rocky cliff. The background shows a vast, hazy landscape with rolling hills and a body of water in the distance. The sky is a mix of light blue and warm orange tones.

7 Secret keys to
DISCOVERING
YOUR LEARNING BODY'S
SUPERPOWER

Cynthia Allen

Are you ready to transform your life?

It's a valid question. Transformation has long-lasting effects and implications. Some of those changes we might be all in on. Others, we might fear or may take us by surprise. While the phrase "your learning body's superpower" is catchy, one of the implications that I expect to happen for you is this:

You will be placed into the center of your own life and the ways in which it unfolds.

This isn't something all of us feel ready for. There will be choice points to accept the role or reject it.

I invite you to allow the keys and the lessons to envelop your life and lead you to new places of acceptance, power, rejuvenation, and enjoyment.

Maybe you came just for the movement. If you approach somatic movement lessons as exercise, you might move better. You also might feel better, but the ways in which the rest of your life is impacted will be very limited. Exercise or robust movement is an important part of life but for many, it is something they may do competitively, may dread, or may do with a sense of "getting it done."

Somatic movement lessons are really some of the worst exercises you will ever do. They're not designed to get your heart rate above a certain point or to build muscle. You'll certainly never see competitive soma Olympics.

On the other hand, if you approach somatic movement lessons with a spirit of discovery, a willingness to see what else can happen or what else you can know, then you are one step closer to claiming your full human potential as a learning body. You'll be giving yourself permission to learn, to change, and to be open to new possibilities.

“**To know thyself is wisdom.**”

-Socrates

We often think of wisdom as something old or learned people offer to others. I believe it is also the path to our greatest potential. We do not reach a point of ultimate wisdom where we cannot learn anymore. Instead, we have the exquisite ability to continue learning throughout our lives.

As you navigate this guide, take time to read each key and really ponder it. Savor the information and apply it to your own situation.

Make it a part of your wisdom.



Cynthia Allen



KEY #1 RESPECTING YOURSELF

It is commonly said that those born to each successive generation become increasingly self-centered. Even if this is true, respecting oneself is not the same and in my view is rarely enacted by members of any generation.

We typically value ourselves for how we look, what we do or what we produce, and not whom we are including our frailties and strengths. Until the pandemic, Western cultures encouraged people to work when they are sick. We have value mantras like “no pain, no gain,” “feel the burn,” “you get what you put into it,” and “you snooze, you lose.”

It’s wonderful to work and achieve. It’s fabulous to excel in physical and professional activities. But If you want to explore your body and improve your life, you may need to put aside all of your previous notions of what you bring to the world and what your value is. This is an opportunity to develop a new kind of respect for yourself and learn how to:

Have less pain and more gain

Use less energy for the same output

Snooze when we need to, and sometimes when you
simply want to

Realize when we are uncomfortable - emotionally
and/or physically

Be less injury prone

Accept when something isn't for us



The verb respect is defined by the Meriam-Webster dictionary as:

--to feel admiration for (someone or something)

--to regard (someone or something) as being worthy of admiration because of good qualities

--To act in a way that shows that you are aware of (someone's rights, wishes, etc.)

--to treat or deal with (something that is good or valuable) in a proper way

When you think of the word respect, is there a certain person that comes to mind? What people do you have respect for in your life? Who are the people that you admire and have high esteem for, the people that perhaps you treat a little differently? We all have people we respect but do you have that same respect for yourself? Do you think it's possible for you to develop that level of esteem for yourself and then perhaps find an even deeper level of respect for your own life?

Allow yourself some time to sit with each of Merriam-Webster's definitions and apply them to yourself. Ask yourself, how often do you respect yourself? Is this an area that could use some growth - some fluffing up?

If the answer is "yes" - and I suspect it is - can you respect yourself for acknowledging this need instead of demeaning yourself? It's interesting, how learning something about ourselves often makes us feel bad for not knowing it before instead of good for discovering it. Embrace your growth and respect yourself for being able and willing to learn new things about yourself, even if they're sometimes uncomfortable.

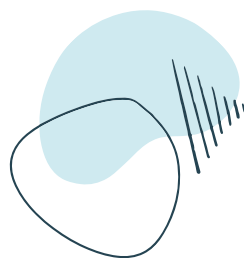
Recently, I read a daily meditation by the priest and author Richard Rohr. it gave some further food for me to ponder.

**"The word "respect" means "to look at a second time":
Re-speculate. Re-spect. I'm afraid our first gaze at
anything is always utilitarian, and it almost totally
takes over after a while ... If we don't recognize the
narrowness and the emptiness of that gaze, it will keep
us forever at the center of a very small world."**

~ Richard Rohr

Yes! During our time together, I hope that you are able to re-spect for a second and third time. You will be surprised by the layers of what you learn about the way you move - emotionally, physically, and spiritually - if you do.

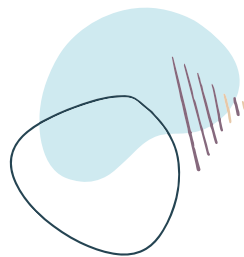
Within Your Learning Body lessons, to respect and re-spect yourself means a number of things. When something hurts or is uncomfortable (physically or emotionally) we pause. Instead of pushing through it, allow yourself time to become curious about those sensations. Sometimes a short rest is all that's needed to return to the movements without discomfort. Other times, you may need to do one or more of the following:



- Do a few movements in your imagination only
- Slow way down in the next attempt
- Listen again to the instructions for other interpretations
- Ignore the teacher and do what you feel is best for you
- Acknowledge your own current physical limitations. Not every movement is meant for everybody and, sometimes, a movement that isn't meant for a body today can be okay for a body tomorrow.

Respecting yourself begins with an attitude of self-acceptance, even when you're not feeling good about yourself. If you come with an attitude of acceptance and openness, the rest of the keys will be much easier and will almost fall into place by themselves.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Find out what it means to you.



REFLECT: RESPECT



KEY #2 SLOWING DOWN AND TAKING TIME

Do you love the feeling of getting a lot of work done?

I do! I am not a slow worker, that's for sure.

I was raised on a farm. We worked hard, and we worked fast. I kept those values into adulthood and slowing down is not my personal cup of tea. This means that slowing down for me can sometimes be very difficult; it can feel like I'm going against my nature. It's a challenge for me and I am sure that for many of you, it will also be a challenge. While it takes practice, and it might even feel a bit uncomfortable at first, there are many benefits to be found when we make the effort and take the time to slow down and tune into our deeper experience.

We likely all remember being taught the story of The Tortoise and the Hare, in which the tortoise eventually wins the race. Which value won that competition?

Hurry Up or Slow and Steady?

Even though we were taught that fable as children, the value didn't stick. What wins out, for most of us, is speed. We are given far more rewards, both externally and internally, for going quickly. Our body gets adrenalized through speed (and accolades), and then we want more adrenaline. It is a very addictive and driving chemical. Some may take issue with my use of addiction in this way, but because it becomes a compulsion to stay at an adrenalin-driven level, and it is one I have been in the grip of a good portion of my life, I feel I can call this an addiction.

In addition, today we have social media delivering jolts per second. Advertisers used to talk about jolts per hour on TV shows. Then it was jolts per minute on the internet when we began listening for the sound indicating a new email had arrived. Now, the advent of social media brought forward jolts per second. The more our nervous system is hijacked by tiny little hits of adrenaline and dopamine through likes and heart emojis, the less in control we are of our own lives. How many times in reading this have you already checked your phone or computer? Do you find yourself drifting and unable to stay on task? Or do you have this inner feeling that you might be missing out on something, so you feel pulled to your phone, email, Facebook, Snapchat - whatever your favorite social media accounts are.

Trauma is another reason that moving fast all the time might be in play. When a person finds the need to be hyper-aware or hyper-vigilant, they can carry this behavior with them for a lifetime. They feel the need to continually be alert, they're dealing with an internal level of anxiety that propels them forward with the need to keep moving. Part of reversing the effects of the trauma is to explore slowing down.

Why would we want to slow down?

To become present and aware, we need time. Please, try this experiment. Turn your head to look as quickly as you can to the right, and then turn back. I'll give you a couple of seconds.

Thanks. Now, turn to the right going half as fast, and return at that same, slower, speed. Now, the next time you turn, let it take a full 10 seconds. How was this experience different than going quickly? Perhaps you noticed the edges of what was uncomfortable more clearly.

Now, turn to the right but slow it down to half as fast as your last attempt. So, we are going really slowly, it could take up to 30 seconds to turn to the right and another 30 seconds or more to return. Slooowly.

This time, you actually saw what you were looking at all along the way. You may have felt your breathing. You likely noticed more details than when turning the first and second times. And you may have felt some previously missed warning signs of discomfort.

The primary reason we want to slow down is to be present, available, and aware. This is very hard to do when moving quickly. In that simple experiment, consider how much you missed by going quickly and how much you noticed at slower speeds. Initially, your primary focus was how quickly you go do the movement, but as you slowed the speed, there were other things that became apparent. Maybe you heard more things, and became more aware of the sensations in your body, in your neck, and the way you were breathing. You had more time to think about what was happening, to process those thoughts, and to even let those thoughts take you to other ones. You're more connected to yourself and everything that's happening around you when you slow down.

Why would we want to slow down?

Another reason for slowing down is that learning something new and unfamiliar requires time. No baby tries to rush learning, only older children and adults do that. The baby takes its time to feel, sense, explore, and wonder. She will try this, then try that. Learning requires a pace that is conducive to experimenting and experiencing. Since you are here to learn something new, slowing down is a baseline requirement.

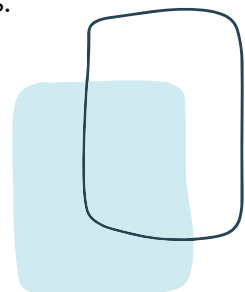
Why would we want to slow down?

The third reason for slowing down is to release the grip of the addiction that tells us the world is continually on fire. That is what adrenaline is designed for, to escape from being harmed or to allow us to have a successful hunt for food. When someone is continually adrenalized, there is a negative effect on all the systems of the body, relationships suffer, and life moves by way too quickly. Instead of experiencing it, we are running through it and missing a lot along the way.

There are so many great reasons to slow down in your life, but the first step could be to try it in Your Learning Body. If you're successful here, then you can begin to incorporate those techniques into your daily life and begin to experience life more fully and be more present. That said, it might not be easy for you to slow down. Don't expect it to be a switch you can turn on and off, or a habit you can instantly develop. It takes time and effort.

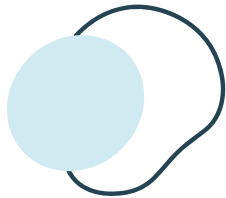
What should you do if slowing down is difficult?

- Play with how much you tolerate it
- Remember to respect yourself
- Find your own learning edge
- Let the teacher's voice guide you, but then, sometimes also ignore it and move at the speed you like
- As you are able, dip increasingly into slower movements.
- You will begin to feel an emerging hunger for this calmer place from which life can be experienced and enjoyed



REFLECT: SLOWING DOWN AND TAKING TIME





KEY #3 SENSING DIFFERENCES

The root of all learning is the capacity to tell the difference between this and that. Where we cannot sense a difference, there is no option to learn.

As a beginning point, we want to establish the capacity to sense breath, inhalation, and exhalation. When do you hold your breath, or when do you change its rhythm? Think about how you're breathing right now. Are you taking deep breaths or are they shallow? Is there a pause between your inhale and exhale or does one follow on the heels of the other? Play with the pace of your breathing to see how it feels. Take a really deep breath but do it quickly. Now, slow it down and enjoy the filling of your lungs, and expansion of your ribs. Does your spine change? Do you straighten up as you inhale deeply? Try shallow breathing, how does your body shift to accommodate this style of breath?

As muscle tone changes, we begin to realize the differences between chronic contraction and availability. When we're chronically contracted, there's tension in the muscles. People who chronically clench their jaws can have headaches, TMJ, jaw pain, and even problems with their teeth. But they've become so accustomed to clenching their jaw that they're not aware that they're doing it. They need to remind themselves to check their jaw tension to see if they're clenching again. But just realizing that they have a tendency to clench is a new form of wisdom about themselves and the beginning of discovering an underlying habit that supports a slew of aches, pains, and other problems.

While we're making changes and paying close attention to our muscles, joints, and bones, we can discern when a movement is easy, less easy, or downright difficult. We can narrow down a large series of actions and break them down into many minute steps that have levels of complexity and difficulty. This is one of the first steps toward understanding where limitations might exist and becomes a piece in your puzzle of you.

The ability to solve puzzles is one of your brain's major functions. Your brain continually scans to determine what is unknown or less familiar. It looks at your movements and instantly tries to categorize them or to understand them in a way that makes sense or has a feeling of familiarity about it. As soon as your brain feels it has enough information to categorize the sensations for use, we have a habit. By accessing differences and using them, we are taking the puzzle, or habit, off the shelf and seeing what else can be done with it.

In somatic lessons, we do this primarily by asking questions. Otherwise, it is quite easy to simply go through movement or our experiences unaware.

These questions are designed to force you to focus on different areas and they open the door to even deeper sensing. Answering the questions is not so important, in fact, that answer itself might not matter.

What's really important and a crucial step in the process is the ability to entertain the question.

Just by asking yourself, you are expressing curiosity. Curiosity and sensing differences are vital partners in the learning process.



REFLECT: SENSING DIFFERENCES

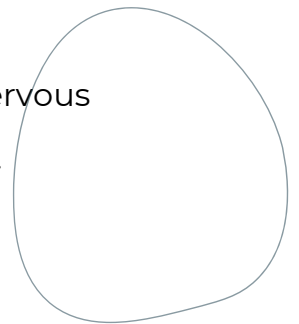


KEY #4 UNIQUE BUT MEANINGFUL STIMULATION

When doing a somatic lesson, such as Feldenkrais® Awareness Through Movement®, the movements sometimes seem foreign or unfamiliar. This is, of course, the essence of learning to do something you've never done before.

As adults, we don't often experience real learning. In fact, when we approach learning something completely new, the challenge of it can be rather surprising. We are tempted to close ourselves off from the new experience and, rather, organize it into something we know and are familiar with. Or, our cognitive mind might wonder if the movements are meaningless or random since it doesn't have any prior understanding of them and can't figure out where to file them. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that they're not worthwhile. They are very important. Feldenkrais lessons are constructed with a theme or multiple themes to explore. We promise that there is a purpose, and if your brain doesn't understand it at first, that's totally natural and it's actually expected. Four of the most common themes we will explore include:

- Calming the nervous system - bringing calm or order to the nervous system is key in chronic pain or chronic challenges of any type.



- Developmental sequence – this is the sequence you went through as a child when you were learning new things. Accessing that sequence is one of the most powerful ways to improve adult functioning throughout life.
- Functional – examples include reaching for an object, getting out of bed, taking a step, seeing, or swallowing.
- Clarifying the Self-Image – the self-image is a kind of brain map of who you are and how you function in the world. The good news is that all maps, especially brain maps, can be improved. A poor map means we often end up somewhere we didn't expect, or the trip takes longer than we hoped. The clearer the map, the more our actions will be congruent within and without, allowing us to get where we intended in the first place. These clarifying lessons contain the following elements of learning:
 - You will learn about the body parts work in relation to each other. How your body connects; where your different parts are specifically; and how you perceive them.
 - You'll also discover opportunities to become aware of how you think about yourself as a human being and discover ways you relate to others and the world around you.



REFLECT: UNIQUE BUT MEANINGFUL STIMULATION



KEY #5 EXPLORING SEQUENCING AND TIMING



Most of us never think about how we do something, we just do it. If we actually take the time to think about how we do something, it's typically in very gross terms, such as "I just right-clicked the button on the mouse." We don't realize that there is a progression of events and ideal timing for those events. There are so many different things that have to happen precisely and in a specific order for anything to be done. By right-clicking the mouse, the sequence of events might be something like this:

- Intend to right-click the mouse
- Lead with the little finger toward the mouse
- Shift weight slightly in the pelvis
- Settle the hand onto the mouse while finding the home place
- Push down with the middle finger as the weight in the index finger lightens

Already, you're probably thinking you don't do all of those steps. And you may not. You may also do some additional steps such as tightening your jaw, holding your breath, or pressing with other body parts at the same time. Try it and see what steps you can come up with. How many steps do you use to click a mouse? Now, break it down even further if you can. Did

Did you miss any steps the first time? Do you pay attention to what you were thinking, what body parts you moved to do the action, and what body parts weren't directly part of the action but might have responded to your mental request?

There are so many different ways your body is responding to your intent, yet most of them go unnoticed on a regular basis. They become the background as you go about your life. But what if that background is suddenly filled with "noise" and it's no longer silent? Imagine reaching for the mouse but feeling pain, a simple movement that meant nothing before is now a priority and it's getting your attention. What actions in your life have gone from being largely unnoticed to a background noise that can build to a roar?

Now consider the simple act of reaching. Even that piece of your larger intent to click the mouse has many components. Some components are necessary to complete the action, but others may be unnecessary, such as tightening your jaw. Are unnecessary components getting in the way of efficiency, a pain-free action, or of your enjoyment?

Timing is another important aspect. The speed - sometimes slow, sometimes fast - or what kind of pause should be between this and that, can be a very valuable exploration. When you reach for the mouse, do you pause, slowly raise your hand, or dart your arm out there - fingers already in the position to click?

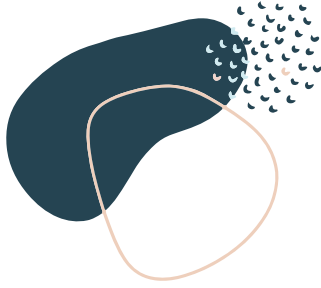
Somatic movement lessons are designed to help us find new sequences and new timing that our habits would ordinarily keep us from discovering. Through the process, we redistribute the effort of a movement throughout the system. This means that we have a different approach: instead of continually overworking one area, we examine all of the areas involved, whether they need to be there or they're a side effect of the way "we've always done it." Because this approach is so magnificently wholistic (not holistic – there is a difference) the risk of injury is lowered, and energy is freed. First, as the movement is more efficient, and then later, as the movement becomes more pleasurable.

Take a minute to think about that concept. You're turning what might have been a painful, troublesome, or entirely routine action into something that can bring you pleasure. The sheer pleasure of being able to move with freedom, intention, and joy. That's saying a lot and can have an incredibly profound effect on your quality of life.



REFLECT: SEQUENCING & TIMING





KEY #6

IDENTIFYING UNHELPFUL HABITS AND BELIEFS

We are habit-filled beings, and that is a good thing. Did you expect me to start harping on bad habits? That's not an uncommon reaction because, as a society, we seem to focus on bad habits. Even just hearing the word "habit" tends to conjure up negative thoughts. Smoking, overeating, drinking too much – they're all bad habits that we're all familiar with. In fact, you may have struggled with a few of them yourself. But we want to turn our attention to other habits, habits we may not even realize we have.

Through some of our habits, we are freed up to explore other areas of life. Without habits, we would need to relearn the simple things each day and that would be exhausting and debilitating. Imagine having to learn how to walk again every day, or how to put food in our mouths. Those very basic things we learned as small children are cemented in our brains and are now our habits of daily living. We do them every single day without giving it any more thought than something like, "Hmm, I think I should eat now." In fact, during that act of eating, we're not thinking about how we're doing it and we might not even be thinking about how our food tastes (how sad is that?). Instead, we're thinking about the next thing on our checklist, our next to-do for the day. So yes, there are bad habits, but there are also good habits that allow us to explore and experience more of the world around us.

Then, we come to the habits that aren't useful. They're not necessarily the bad habits that have negative effects, nor the good habits that help us function. These habits just happen and they really don't need to. The tendency to tighten your jaw when you're typing on your computer or moving your mouse could be an example of a habit that isn't useful. You might not be aware of the fact that you do it most of the time and you certainly don't need to do it to complete your mouse click, but you do it anyway.

Another internal habit could be the way we think about ourselves and the world around us. Personal beliefs that might get in the way could be:

I am old and old people have pain

I am a stiff person

I need to stretch several times a day

I already know how to move

I am broken

My back condition can't improve

I need to prove that I know a lot

I am a slow learner

No one cares about me

But it's not just the things we tell ourselves, our habitual inner dialogue; there are world beliefs that creep into our habitual thought patterns, too. Examples of world beliefs that may be unhelpful could include:

Life is hard

No one can be trusted

People don't like me

The teacher knows best

I always need to follow the rules,

no matter how trivial

Trauma never goes away

I need to test the rules to show I have freedom

What has become an unhelpful belief in your life likely formed as a way to cope with an unpredictable world. Our brain is always trying to make sense of the world around us. If things feel scary, novel, or unpredictable, the brain may latch onto an idea as a foothold for making the overwhelming somehow sensible. As we become more aware and find our own resiliency, we can choose to replace an old belief with something that is more useful. We develop different brain footholds to use that can propel us upward, toward greater wisdom.

Within somatic movement lessons, there are many “Aha!” moments that can illuminate self-attitudes and world beliefs. When these moments happen, a full pause can be important. Give yourself some time to reflect in journaling, walking, or talking to a good listener. Internalize what you’ve discovered and consider ways that belief has held you back.

Is that belief entirely unhelpful or has it helped you get by in certain situations?

Reevaluate those situations and try to imagine how you would have responded without that belief in your habitual infrastructure. Picture letting go of that belief and replacing it with your newfound wisdom and mentally practicing encountering these situations again. Visualizing can be a big step in the process. Discussing your findings with others can also be an important step. If the belief is too personal, you don’t have to share it, but if you feel you can, you might even learn more by hearing yourself talk about it aloud. Getting the most out of somatic education means including your emotional life as well.



REFLECT: UNHELPFUL HABITS AND BELIEFS



KEY #7 CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT

Some of us come to this work feeling broken. Traumatic experiences and intense feelings of grief, loss, abandonment, or shame are unfortunately common. There is popular talk that these feelings or memories are trapped inside our bodies. Often even within a specific muscle. I believe they can be accessed through movement patterns - both familiar and unfamiliar ones - and that through a respectful approach, such as Awareness Through Movement, they become integrated. Talk may not be the only or even best way to move towards freedom from a painful past or present.

Besides using somatic movement, I am a big believer in the healing and growing through creative expression. Creativity is an essential aspect of learning. It's also an important part of growth and healing. Having a creative outlet gives your brain and body the chance to work together to create something. It can shift you from being mired in the same old stuck place to feeling an openness to life that is in line with the act of creation.

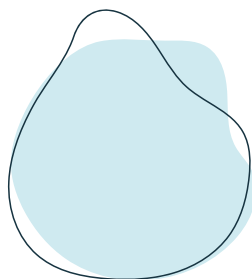
Allow those feelings to live and transmute outside of your own body and within the larger world by working with clay, drawing, or painting. For some, journaling or writing poetry/prose is perfect. Gardening can be very healing and exhilarating to others. All of these pursuits involve making something more or less out of nothing. There's a sense of accomplishment in planning, doing, seeing, and realizing that's rewarding and it can also be releasing.

Letting go of things that you've held onto and confined frees you up to be more expressive. And don't worry – you don't have to be great at what you do, you just have to enjoy doing it.

Somatic movement lessons encourage creativity. They spark curiosity. They spark awareness. You'll find that there are many ways to do one thing and that often has an interesting carry-over into the rest of your life. You'll become intrigued by not only doing something different and breaking a habit but by the realization that you made that happen. That you controlled your destiny in this small way and made a big change.

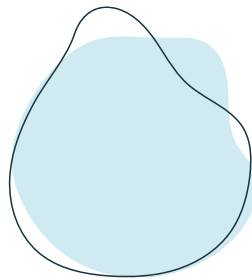
Suddenly, the world opens up to you and you become aware of the potential that you have. That incredible, dynamic, and unique potential lies inside of you if you're willing to let go of routine and embrace something new. As you become curious about the world around you and how you fit into it, you collect the keys needed to open doors and travel into exciting places.

You may find you want to take more risks in cooking, or you may decide to try out for an acting role in a local play, or you could decide to finally write that novel you've talked about - the sky's the limit! This is the perfect time to stop talking about change and take the steps to make that change happen.



You never know how these movement lessons and keys might impact your life.

How do you or would you like to encourage more creative expression in your life?



REFLECT: CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT



To recap, here are the seven keys to Discovering Your Learning Body's
Movement Superpower:

Respecting Yourself

Slowing Down and Taking Time

Sensing Differences

Unique but Meaningful Stimulation

Sequencing and Timing

Identifying Unhelpful Habits and Beliefs

Creative Engagement

I hope you will revisit these keys - regularly. They will be embedded within your movement lessons with us - sometimes we will call them out, sometimes you might call them out (and we encourage you to do that!). These keys can serve you well in other situations. Consider them transportable – they go with you anywhere you go. They don't need to live within Your Learning Body lessons alone, take them out for a walk and see how your movement superpower can improve your life.

