

How the Body Knows Its Mind: The Surprising Power of the Physical Environment to Influence How You Think and Feel

By Sian Beilock



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An award-winning scientist offers a groundbreaking new understanding of the mind-body connection and its profound impact on everything from advertising to romance.

The human body is not just a passive device carrying out messages sent by the brain, but rather an integral part of how we think and make decisions. In her groundbreaking new book, Sian Beilock, author of the highly acclaimed *Choke*, which *Time* magazine praised for its “smart tips...in order to think clearly...and be cool under pressure,” draws on her own cutting-edge research to turn the conventional understanding of the mind upside down in ways that will revolutionize how we live our lives.

At the heart of *How the Body Knows Its Mind* is the tantalizing idea that our bodies “hack” our brains. The way we move affects our thoughts, our decisions, and even our preferences for particular products. Called “embodied cognition,” this new science—of which Beilock is a foremost researcher—illuminates the power of the body and its physical surroundings to shape how we think, feel, and behave. Beilock’s findings are as varied as they are surprising. For example, pacing around the room can enhance creativity; gesturing during a speech can help ensure that you don’t draw a blank; kids learn better when their bodies are part of the learning process; walking in nature boosts concentration skills; Botox users experience less depression; and much more. From the tricks used by advertisers to the ways body language can improve your memory, Beilock explains a wealth of fascinating interconnections between mind and body and how mastering them can make us happier, safer, and more successful.

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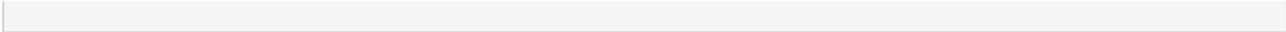
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Editorial Review

Review

"How often do you read a book that is profound and also fun -- or that is full of surprises, but that also gives you that pleasant jolt of immediate recognition? Do a big favor for your body and your mind. Read Beilock's terrific book as soon as you can!" (Cass R. Sunstein, Robert Walmsley University Professor, Harvard University, and coauthor of *Nudge*)

"*How the Body Knows Its Mind* is a tour de force that teaches us the revolutionary new science of how our own physical interaction with the world around us strongly influences our ability to learn and perform. I highly recommend it." (Michael Lardon M.D., author of *Mastering Golf's Mental Game* and *Finding Your Zone*)

"*How the Body Knows Its Mind* has helpful insights for everyone. It is a must-have in your home." (Larry King)

"*How the Body Knows Its Mind* is a journey in the direction less traveled: from body to brain, rather than the reverse, illuminating the surprising ways that our physical actions can change our minds. From "laughter yoga" to Botox as a treatment for depression, to the importance of finger dexterity for learning math, Beilock charts a wondrous tour through the mind-body connection." (David Epstein, author of *The Sports Gene*)

"Insightful, informative, and beautifully written, *How the Body Knows Its Mind* is a smart surprise that you won't want to miss!" (Daniel Gilbert, author of *Stumbling on Happiness*)

"A very interesting and useful book. I recommend it!" (Carol Dweck, author of *Mindset*)

"How our bodies and minds work in tandem. Wide-ranging, informative and entertaining, especially for parents and educators." (*Kirkus*)

"Beilock reveals one intriguing secret after another... That Beilock is supercharged with enthusiasm about her topic is evident and infectious." (*Booklist STARRED review*)

"Sian Beilock shares the insights of embodied cognition with the rest of us. Through vivid stories and clear explanations, Beilock reveals how our bodies shape our thoughts and actions in surprising and compelling ways. It's rare to find a first-class scientist who is also a first-class writer; Beilock, lucky for us, is both." (Annie Murphy Paul, author of *Origins*)

"In our quests to be more successful and influential, as well as happier and healthier, nothing has been so overlooked as the way we can use our own bodies and our environments to reach those goals. This book is life-changing. Read it now." (Heidi Grant Halvorson, Ph.D., author of *Nine Things Successful People Do Differently*)

About the Author

Sian Beilock, a leading expert on the brain science behind human performance, is a professor in the psychology department at the University of Chicago. She has PhDs in both kinesiology and psychology from Michigan State University, and received an award for Transformative Early Career Contributions from the

Association for Psychological Science in 2011.

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How the Body knows its Mind

INTRODUCTION

What's Outside Our Head Alters What's Inside

I was running through the woods at full speed when my right foot made contact with a large tree root jutting out of the ground in front of me. My running partner was ahead of me and, thankfully, out of sight, so he didn't see me stumble. We were almost done; only a few more turns on the winding dirt path we'd been following for the better part of five miles and we would be at the car.

I struggled to stay upright, but I couldn't. It was impossible to keep my feet under me. My view of the trees turned sideways and I went down. My hands landed first, followed by my right arm, and then the rest of my body with a loud thud. Everything stopped moving for a few seconds before I could manage to make sure that I was still in one piece. With only a small amount of blood trickling down my leg, I jumped to my feet and was off again. My heart beat loudly in my ears, and my labored breathing reverberated in my chest, but I was moving again and could see my running mate in the distance. A few turns later, the dark greens and browns of the woods gave way to the sun reflecting off the cement parking lot where a lone blue BMW sat parked at the far end. Rolf, my running partner, was already toweling himself off and drinking from a water bottle he had stashed in the car. I had made it. As I walked over to him, I straightened up even more in order to shake off and hide the pain I was in, put on my best smile, and tried to look as confident as possible.

It's always a little nerve-racking going for a run with someone you don't know, and even more so when your running partner is deciding whether he wants to offer you a job. A week earlier I had received an email from Rolf Zwaan, a professor at Florida State University, where I was about to interview for my first big-time assistant professor position. Rolf asked whether I wanted to go for a run with him in Elinor Klapp-Phipps Park, a nearby nature preserve, the night before my interview started. My plane got in early, so it would be something to do to pass the time, he suggested. To be honest, my first thought was "Absolutely not." Did I really want to spend any more time than I had to with someone who was going to be judging my every move for the next two days? But the more I thought about the idea, the more appealing the run became. Interviewing for a job is a rather sedentary experience—sitting in meeting after meeting all day long—so any opportunity to get in a workout seemed like something I shouldn't pass up. Pumping up my body always seemed to do something positive for my mind, and being outdoors made me feel sharper. As the poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "The health of the eye seems to demand a horizon. We are never tired, so long as we can see far enough." And finally, I hoped during our run to learn more about the cool research Rolf had been doing.

Rolf was trying to understand how humans think. I had just read a paper of his in which he argued that we don't "think" the way a computer does, by manipulating abstract symbols in our head. Rather, when we, say, read a story, our brain reactivates traces of previous experiences to make sense of words on a page, almost as if we are mentally simulating being in the story ourselves. In support of his ideas, Rolf and his students had conducted a set of ingenious experiments in which they had people read simple sentences, such as "The eagle was in the sky." The sentence was followed by a picture of an eagle either with wings outstretched (as it would be when it flew in the sky) or by its side (as when perched on its nest). People were asked to indicate if the object in the picture had been mentioned in the preceding sentence. Rolf predicted that, if we

understand what we read by mentally placing ourselves in the story, calling upon relevant visual, action, and even emotional information from the past, then we should automatically think about the eagle's shape and respond faster to the eagle that matches the shape implied in the sentence: wings outstretched when we read about an eagle flying, wings down when we read about it in the nest. This is exactly what Rolf found.¹

Rolf's work points to a new way to think about thinking: it demonstrates that our thinking is embodied in that it involves re-experiencing similar bodily experiences from the past. This means that our brain might not make a clear distinction between past memories and what we experience in the present. In other words, our neural hardware might not draw a clear division between thought and action, so that we might be able to use our body and our physical environment to be sharper mentally.

The day after our run in the park, I couldn't help but consider all the factors that would contribute to whether I was going to ace my interview. I realized that lots of influences outside my own cortex affected the thought processes that went on inside it.

This book is about the many external influences that affect the contents of our mind. The ways my brain worked in my interview, for instance, were influenced by my run the day before. Yes, the exercise made my thoughts sharper, but simply being in the woods had changed my thinking too. And holding my body as if I weren't in pain after my fall actually made me feel better. Whatever we—babies, kids, adults, athletes, actors, CEOs, and you—do from the neck down has a striking impact on what goes on from the neck up. From our brain's standpoint, there isn't much of a line between the physical and the mental. This book explains how we can take advantage of that permeable line and improve our mind by using our body.

Today countless books detail how we think and reason, from Dan Ariely's *Predictably Irrational* to Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking Fast and Slow*. However, very few books consider the influence that our body has on our thinking and decision making, or, more important, how we can leverage our body to change our own mind and the minds of those around us. We tend not to give our body much credit for how we think and feel. But, simply put, kids learn better when they can freely use their body as a tool for acquiring information. For instance, practicing printing letters actually helps kids read. And when you relate mathematical concepts in physical terms, like "Add money to your piggy bank" or "Give away half of your cookies to your sister," kids better understand numbers. The tight relationship between body and mind is also why music and mathematical talent often go hand in hand. Our ability to control our finger movements and our ability to juggle numbers in our head share common neural real estate, which scientists have argued is one reason why building finger dexterity through piano playing can help kids count more fluently in math.

As students' test scores are emphasized more and more, administrators are cutting music, recess, and play in order to keep kids confined to their chairs. But this is a terrible policy, since children learn best through action. How we think is intimately tied to our body and our surroundings. Random hands-on activities cannot make up for our educational woes and our slipping global standing in math and reading skills, but realizing that the body shapes the mind gives us power to structure school to help children learn and think at their best. The current schooling regimen actually hinders children's thinking and learning. In fact our current, sedentary office workplace—and our sedentary lifestyle—keeps adults from thinking and performing at their best too.

The ancient Greeks viewed the human body as a temple that houses the mind. They recognized the linked health of mind and body. By extension, it's also important to pay attention to the environment in which you place your body. I'll tell you the mental power that exercise gives you and show you why body-centered meditation can enhance your ability to focus at work. You will also meet a researcher who has discovered that green space in inner-city projects leads to less violence in the home. And you will learn how to use the

power of nature to think more clearly and have more self-control.

Your body helps you learn, understand, and make sense of the world. It can influence and even change your mind—whether or not you are aware of its influence. Companies that make health care products, snacks, and beverages, like Johnson & Johnson and Coca-Cola, have figured this out; they use scientific information about the body’s influence to convince us to buy their products. Companies like Google, which understand how important our body is to thinking and creativity, make it easy for their employees to get up and move and to get out and exercise. When your body can move outside the box, your thinking tends to follow.

Your face does a lot more than simply express your emotions; it affects how you register those emotions inside your head and remember them. Frowning and smiling can actually create different emotions and attitudes; they’re not just the physical result of a mood. Standing in a “power pose”—a wide, assertive stance—is linked to increased feelings of power and confidence, which might get you a new client or kudos at work.

Taking Tylenol not only helps ease physical pain; it can also ease the psychological pain of loneliness and rejection. And being physically close to someone else makes us feel more psychologically connected—of one mind. In contrast, being far away sends a subtle signal that we have less common mental ground with others; this is important to know when considering our ever-increasing reliance on virtual communication and whether it is bringing us closer or pushing us farther apart. Why do we gesture when we are on the phone and no one can see us? Can physically manipulating Baoding balls—those little Chinese metal balls that some executives have on their desk—lead to more creative ideas? These are just a few of the questions you will find answers to—answers that have to do with how the body interacts with and responds to its surroundings. Our body has a surprising amount of power in shaping our mind. We just have to learn how to use it.

A few weeks after my interview I got a call from Florida State letting me know I was their second choice; they had offered the job to someone else. I was disappointed (to put it mildly). But my experience, from my mind-clearing run to learning about striking new research on how our body influences our thinking, had convinced me that being successful isn’t just dependent on what happens in our head. I realized that what goes on outside our body has a strong influence on the contents of our mind. I had four more interviews to go, and I was determined to use my new knowledge to my advantage. Over the next several weeks I flew to Atlanta to interview at Georgia Tech, Pittsburgh to interview at Carnegie Mellon University, Cincinnati to interview at Miami University, and Greensboro to interview at the University of North Carolina. On each interview I made a point of acknowledging the power my body and my surroundings could have on how I thought and performed. Whether it was a short run the night I flew in, a walk in the park the morning before my first meeting of the day, or simply standing strong and tall during my research talk, I did everything I could to work the line between body and mind.

Of course, anyone who has ever been interviewed for a job knows how idiosyncratic hiring decisions can be; many factors that seem irrelevant to a candidate’s performance can play into the final decision. But I am convinced that part of what gave me an edge in these interviews was the fact that I used the power of my body and surroundings to my advantage. I was offered all four jobs.

I hope that, as you accompany me through the rich terrain of body-mind research, the stories I tell will help you too see ways to improve your life and work.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Luba Jacobs:

The reserve untitled How the Body Knows Its Mind: The Surprising Power of the Physical Environment to Influence How You Think and Feel is the reserve that recommended to you to learn. You can see the quality of the reserve content that will be shown to you. The language that writer use to explained their way of doing something is easily to understand. The copy writer was did a lot of analysis when write the book, so the information that they share for you is absolutely accurate. You also can get the e-book of How the Body Knows Its Mind: The Surprising Power of the Physical Environment to Influence How You Think and Feel from the publisher to make you considerably more enjoy free time.

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People live in this new day of lifestyle always make an effort to and must have the free time or they will get lots of stress from both lifestyle and work. So , when we ask do people have free time, we will say absolutely without a doubt. People is human not really a robot. Then we request again, what kind of activity are there when the spare time coming to you of course your answer will unlimited right. Then do you try this one, reading textbooks. It can be your alternative within spending your spare time, typically the book you have read is actually How the Body Knows Its Mind: The Surprising Power of the Physical Environment to Influence How You Think and Feel.

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Mildred Olsen:

Is it you who having spare time after that spend it whole day simply by watching television programs or just resting on the bed? Do you need something new? This How the Body Knows Its Mind: The Surprising Power of the Physical Environment to Influence How You Think and Feel can be the response, oh how comes? A fresh book you know. You are so out of date, spending your extra time by reading in this fresh era is common not a nerd activity. So what these guides have than the others?

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