The Embodied Experience and Transformative Learning: Moving Towards a Healthy and Empowered Self

Iafrate, Marco

http://hdl.handle.net/1880/108712

Downloaded from PRISM Repository, University of Calgary
The Embodied Experience and Transformative Learning:
Moving Towards a Healthy and Empowered Self

by

Marco Iafrate

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

GRADUATE DIVISION OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

CALGARY, ALBERTA

SEPTEMBER, 2018

© Marco Iafrate 2018
Abstract

Using a qualitative single case study methodology, this study explored whether and how individuals find an empowered sense of themselves through their bodies and physical experiences. Five participants underwent 6 weeks of physical activity, with each week focusing on a different aspect of self-care. Research data were gathered through pre and post assessments, a 6-week questionnaire, and semistructured interviews. Five themes emerged for the first subquestion ("What enhances or promotes embodied learning, which can then help one find an empowered sense of self?"): (a) curiosity and a willingness to learn, (b) reflection, (c) examination for personal improvement, (d) support, and (e) character strengths. Four qualities were found from the analysis of the second subquestion ("What role does the human body serve in transformational learning?"): (a) thoughtfulness, (b) personal acknowledgement, (c) health and wholeness, and (d) the affirmation of oneself. The participants’ experiences suggest that their engagement in the study had a positive impact on self-care, sense of self, and perspective change. The results provide insights for ongoing discussion into the role of embodied learning and its connection to overarching themes within transformative learning, which are disorienting dilemmas, reflection, and discourse. These findings contribute to the growing body of research in transformational learning by providing ideas for new conceptions for practice and by bringing attention back to the physical body as a source of learning and transformation.

Keywords: embodied learning, transformative learning, physical activity, self-care
Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my wonderful family for their love and unconditional support. They mean the world to me, and without them I never could have made it this far.

I also want to thank my editor, Karen Crosby, for her tireless effort and time.

I am grateful for the generosity of the participants for sharing their accounts of their experiences and learning.

I want to thank the members of my thesis committee, Dr. Colleen Kawalilak and Dr. Ian Winchester, for their time and feedback.

Finally, I wish to express gratitude to my thesis advisor, Dr. Janet Groen. Her guidance, patience, and support on my journey were unparalleled. Thank you.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................... iii

Table of Contents .............................................................................................................. iv

Chapter 1: Introduction ................................................................................................. 1

Introduction to the Problem and Personal Rationale ....................................................... 2

Purpose and Significance of the Study ............................................................................ 7

Thesis Overview ............................................................................................................. 8

Chapter 2: Literature Review ......................................................................................... 9

Transformative Learning ................................................................................................. 9

Meaning-Making ............................................................................................................. 11

Critical Reflection and Transformation ......................................................................... 13

Emotions and Fear in Transformative Learning ............................................................. 14

A New Way of Knowing: Embodied Transformation in Action .................................... 17

Self-Care: The Merging of Ancient and Western Practices Through Embodied Learning ...... 20

Summary ....................................................................................................................... 22

Chapter 3: Methodology ............................................................................................... 23

Overview of Philosophical Foundation and Research Methodology ................................ 23

Research Methodology: Qualitative Case Study ............................................................ 26

Data Analysis ................................................................................................................ 37

Ethical Considerations ................................................................................................. 40

Summary ....................................................................................................................... 41

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis ................................................................................ 42
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants: Personal Stories of Motivation and Transformation</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thematic Analysis</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Practice</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and Delimitations</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Considerations</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Form</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Six-Week Questionnaire Including Pre- and Post-Assessments</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Participant Consent Form</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D: Safety Tips and Borg Scale of Perceived Exertion</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E: Life Wheel Assessment</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F: Post Session Coaching Recap</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix G: Interview Schedule</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Introduction

Is the human body an instrument for transformative learning, personal discovery, and empowerment? Does it serve a role in moving individuals beyond critical reflection and into meaningful self-expression and action? Transformative learning is the process by which people make meaning of their experiences and ultimately act in accordance with the meanings they have created. It involves developing beliefs, questioning assumptions, and making informed decisions based on those beliefs and assumptions through a learning process of constructing and appropriating new and revised interpretations of the meaning of an experience in the world (Christie, Carey, Robertson, & Grainger, 2015; Groen & Kawalilak, 2014; Hoggan, 2015, 2016; Howie & Bagnall, 2013; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Taylor, 2008). Knowledge about transformative learning theory has continued to grow, and it continues to be a popular area of research in the field of adult learning (Christie et al., 2015; Hoggan, 2015; Taylor, 2015; Taylor & Cranton, 2012b, 2013; Taylor & Laros, 2014; Taylor & Snyder, 2012). However, there is still a need for more in-depth theoretical and critical analysis of the latest research on transformative learning theory, as well as continued engagement in conducting research in this area (Christie et al., 2015; Hoggan, 2015; Hoggan, Mälkki, & Finnegan, 2017; Howie & Bagnall, 2013; Taylor, 2015; Taylor & Cranton, 2012b, 2013; Taylor & Laros, 2014; Taylor & Snyder, 2012).

New conceptions of and research trends into transformative learning are emerging and have been focused on, but not limited to, the centrality of experience and critical reflection, the role of relationships and context, and the evolution of research designs (Christie et al., 2015; Greenhill, Richards, Mahoney, Campbell, & Walters, 2018; Hoggan, 2016; Hoggan et al., 2017; Klein, 2018; Kreber, 2012; MacKeracher, 2012; Merriam, 2009a; Nerstrom, 2014; Nohl, 2015; Rigg, 2017; Taylor, 2015; Taylor & Cranton, 2013; Taylor & Laros, 2014; Taylor & Snyder, 2012).
2012; Thong, 2015; Tisdell, 2012). In addition, more holistic forms of learning and knowing are being explored, and recent advancements in neuroscience, cognitive neuroscience, mind–body research, and adult learning have brought attention back to the physical body as a source of learning and transformation (Clark, 2012; Freiler, 2009; Papastamatis & Panitsides, 2014; Piercy, 2013; Rigg, 2017; Smith & Sheya, 2010; Smyrnaiou, Sotiriou, Georgakopoulou, & Papadopoulou, 2016; Yoo & Loch, 2016). The purpose of this thesis was to explore the role of the body and physical movement in the transformational experience by providing individuals with a new avenue for knowing, growth, and fulfillment.

**Introduction to the Problem and Personal Rationale**

Learning is a natural process (MacKeracher, 2004), and yet people complicate what is innate. With the arrival of the Enlightenment during the 18th century, and primarily through the influence of René Descartes (1596–1650), Western learning has come to rely on the dominance of the rational mind to understand oneself (Ergas, 2013; Holbrook, May, Albers, Dooley, & Flint, 2015; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Nguyen & Larson, 2015; Strozzi-Heckler, 2014). Through the act of dismembering the mind and body, the criteria for learning became cognitive rather than embodied. “For most people in the Western world how to describe and interpret being embodied and experiencing embodiment in the moment remains awkward and challenging. . . . Many of us have become disconnected from and inattentive to our bodies” (Freiler, 2008, pp. 38–39).

As a result, the compartmentalization of the mind, body, emotions, and spirit may have hindered people’s natural abilities as learners (Ergas, 2013; MacKeracher, 2004; Strozzi-Heckler, 2014) and may offer a partial explanation for the increased stress and physical and emotional trauma individuals seem to be experiencing (Strozzi–Heckler, 2014). In his
psychotherapy practice, Strozzi-Heckler (2014) found that the traditional, cognitive psychological lens to treating patients became insufficient. The return to an embodied approach, where thought, action, emotion, spirit, and energy were linked, led to his clientele no longer seeing themselves as broken, but as travelling a path of restoration and transformation (Strozzi-Heckler, 2014). Treatment sessions examined how clients formed themselves and how they could be whole, rather than dissecting symptoms. Strozzi-Heckler (2014) noticed within this examination, their innate capacity for self-healing, self-educating, and self-generating grew, and with it, the capacity to learn and transform.

This use of the body to enable capacity and transformation could also be described as personal empowerment, the process with which individuals form positive self-perceptions, discover their strengths and competencies, and display greater control of their actions to make changes for the better (Cartwright, Gibson, & Read, 2018; Hassi & Laursen, 2015; Hennick, Kiiti, Pillinger, & Jayakaran, 2012). A core concept within personal empowerment is agency, which is characterized by active self-reflection and self-regulation of thoughts, plans, actions, and beliefs in ability (Bandura, 2006; Cartwright et al., 2018; Hassi & Laursen, 2015; Hennick et al., 2012). Self-perceptions and interpretations of personal experiences can empower or disempower, depending on the context. As such, they can greatly impact the meaning of an experience, making agency and empowerment relevant to transformative learning.

Transformative learning theory first emerged in the academic world over 35 years ago, and its creation has primarily been attributed to the groundbreaking work of Jack Mezirow, an adult educator who, in the late 1970s, studied the experiences of women resuming their education after an extended period away from university or the workforce, respectively (Baumgartner, 2012; Howie & Bagnall, 2013; Kitchenham, 2008; Merriam & Bierema, 2014;
Tisdell, 2012). He determined that transformative learning is a process by which one critically examines, reflects, and questions one’s beliefs and assumptions (Howie & Bagnall, 2013; Kitchenham, 2008; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Mezirow, 2012; Taylor, 2008; Taylor & Laros, 2014), leading learners to be more effective in acting on their reflective judgments (Mezirow, 2012). This reflection and decision to act often involve overcoming situational, emotional, and informational constraints that may require new learning experiences to move forward (Mezirow, 2012).

Although the transformational learning process can be rational, it also has the potential to be a profound, life-shifting spiritual and/or emotional experience. This challenging of one’s deeply held beliefs, leaping into unknown territory, can invoke a threatening emotional experience (Mezirow, 2012). According to Mezirow (2012), the qualities that constitute emotional intelligence are essential to transformative learning. Tapping into one’s senses, feelings, and body opens the process of cognition to something more than just logic or reason. Exploring embodied learning and the body as an instrument for meaningful change contributes to the scholarship of transformative learning. The research is also personal for me. This thesis is both a research paper and a reflection of my life.

My rationale for exploring the connection between the body and learning first began with studying my personal experiences before I turned to studying the literature. My interest in the human body and physicality can be seen throughout many of my personal, academic, and career choices. While I was obtaining my first degree in human physiology, I was intent on becoming a medical doctor—this was to be my calling. After much reflection, I came to understand that I care about people’s wellness, but not in the traditional or clinical sense. This realization resulted in the development of my career as a health coach and wellness instructor. In my sessions with
clients, I incorporate life coaching into fitness regimes and classes through an embodied experience. The intent is to create a focal point for the intellect to remove mental distractions and allow innate creativity and intuition to surface. My clients would often comment on not only the insights and solutions that arose from integrating the body as a focal point but also the feelings of empowerment and capability they experienced. I began to wonder if physical practices and strategic dialogue could create a holistic learning experience for problem solving.

These questions became personal during the process of writing this thesis. Normal everyday family commitments—family time, financial responsibilities, work, and education—became all-consuming and overwhelming. I struggled under this weight until my momentum completely stopped, and I got lost in my mind and fears. Outdated yet still powerful life-limiting beliefs took over my thoughts. Despite real-world, logical evidence to the contrary, I doubted my ability to manifest my most meaningful goals and create meaningful work. The entire process became crippling. Overwhelming feelings of duty and responsibility were compounded with feelings of guilt, shame, and anxiety. My mental, physical, and spiritual health suffered. Unlike my earlier journey to find my calling, this journey was about finding my power to see my goals and passions through to completion.

To initiate a shift, I decided to put myself through the process of my study. I was going to be my first participant, but when I reached down to grab the questionnaire, I hesitated. Two thoughts immediately came to mind: “What am I hiding from?” and “When I see myself, what if I don’t like what I see?” What followed was a small act of courage. I simply reached down and picked up the questionnaire. In the face of fear, I acted in the simplest way and began to write. What came out was authentic, insightful, and uplifting. It led to an instantaneous feeling of calmness and confidence, which, in turn, led to deeper reflection and the ability to summon more
courage. That moment came from a willingness to look at myself through the context of my personal well-being and health. Personal health and my body served as a lens for observing my emotions and thoughts, which then served as a catalyst to generate transformative energy and physical action. I shifted from being insecure and shameful to being confident and empowered through one simple embodied action. I transformed.

Challenges to one’s sense of self will occur at all stages and in different facets of life. The results can be disorienting and disabling, to say the least. This disorientation occurs not because of a lack of capability, intelligence, or skill set; one gets stuck in a rut, so to speak, because disempowering beliefs and the emotions associated with them hinder one’s ability to act effectively. The beliefs and emotions that surface may manifest in different ways. In my case, they manifested as a paralyzing withdrawal, procrastination, anxiety, and insomnia. Rationally, I knew my behaviour was undermining my best intentions, and yet the sabotaging choices still occurred. I came to realize that it was essential to have a method to reflect, reveal, release, and renew so that I could move forward powerfully. Through critical reflection, finding meaning in experiences, and engaging in powerful relationships with others, and oneself, a person constructs a purposeful and fulfilling life. My personal journey illustrates how the body can serve in the process of critical reflection and provide a domain for learning, empowerment, and transformation. For me, it was an avenue of healing, rediscovery, and renewal. As a learning tool, the body can help people explore their thoughts, emotions, and feelings and provide a new understanding of experience. It can give new meaning to the past and to what people know and believe in the present, shaping their futures for the better.

The complex relationships among mind, body, learning, and empowerment require fresh perspectives for generating and capturing learning. These perspectives and methods may offer
alternatives to deeply embedded assumptions of personal transformation, critical reflection, and the role of embodied learning in transformative learning. Emerging research and the use of embodied learning in areas such as trauma treatment, education, dance, community and social transformation, and business and leadership reflect the revival of the body as a source of learning (Clark, 2012; Dirkx, Buechener, Myers, Peleg-Baker, & Konvisser, 2016; Freiler, 2009; Ollis, 2008; Papastamatis & Panitsides, 2014; Piercy, 2013; Rhodes, 2015; Rigg, 2017; Smith & Sheya, 2010; Smyrnaïou et al., 2016; Swartz, 2010; Taylor & Cranton, 2013; Tsouvala & Magos, 2016; Yoo & Loch, 2016). Learning more about how individuals experience themselves through their bodies to discover within themselves the characteristics and behaviours of empowerment will expand the understanding of the relationship between transformative and embodied learning. In this thesis I present my research study, designed to gain further insight into embodied experiences and learning, and their applicability to transformative learning.

**Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the relationship between physical activity and transformational learning for adults over the age of 18. Specifically, I endeavoured to explore if and how individuals find an empowered sense of themselves through their bodies and physical experiences. The guiding subquestions for the study included the following:

1. What enhances or promotes embodied learning, which can then help one find an empowered sense of self?

2. What role does the human body serve in transformational learning?

The theoretical and practical significance of this study is that it is focused on an area that is still relatively new. Findings contribute to research that has addressed if and how
empowerment through physical movement/engagement is connected to transformative learning experiences. From a practical perspective, transformative learning through physical engagement may be an effective way for adults to develop behaviours and characteristics that lead to self-empowerment and agency. Rather than wait for transformation to emerge, individuals would benefit from being able to specifically foster the development of transformative behaviours and characteristics.

**Thesis Overview**

In this introductory chapter, I outlined the intent, personal rationale, and context for my study. I also described the purpose, research questions, and significance of the study. In Chapter 2, the literature review, I outline transformative learning and its key concepts, its application in other fields, embodied learning, and, finally, how I conceptualized this research within the field of transformative learning. My philosophical orientation, my research methodology, and my research methods are given in Chapter 3. The study findings and analysis, including participant profiles and key themes, are provided in Chapter 4. A discussion and conclusions, including areas for future research, are given in Chapter 5.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to contextualize embodied learning within the world of transformative learning. I approached this literature review with the goal of explaining what transformative learning and embodied learning are and how they occur, and demonstrating the framework and lens from which I approached the study. I divided the chapter into six areas. First, I give an overview of transformative learning, its definition, the central elements, and what gaps and opportunities exist in the literature. Second, I consider the notion of meaning-making within Mezirow’s (2012) conception of transformative learning, followed by my third topic, an exploration of critical reflection and how it connects to transformative meaning-making. Fourth, I cover the role that emotions and fear play in transformative learning. Turning to embodied learning, I define embodied learning and consider its connection to emotions, fear, meaning-making, and importance in transformative learning. I also address embodied transformation in action as applied in different disciplines. Finally, I examine self-care and holistic practices and their role and relevance to embodied practices. I close the chapter with a summary of the key concepts within the literature review.

Transformative Learning

Built on a foundation of constructivist and experiential assumptions, transformative learning theory focuses on adult learning, education, and development (Hoggan, 2015; Kitchenham, 2008; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Taylor & Cranton, 2012b). Mezirow’s theory arose from his study of women returning to higher education after an extended time away from post-secondary education or the workforce (Christie et al., 2015; Kitchenham, 2008; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). He observed that their experiences led to critical self-reflection; the long-held notions of self these women had held were questioned, challenged, and ultimately changed
(Christie et al., 2015; Kitchenham, 2008; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Based on these findings, Mezirow and his team of researchers concluded that the respondents had undergone a “personal transformation” (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 105), also called a perspective transformation, and identified 10 phases for the transformation process:

1. A disorienting dilemma;
2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame;
3. Critical assessment of assumptions;
4. Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and others have negotiated a similar change;
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions;
6. A plan for a course of action;
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans;
8. Provisionally trying out new roles;
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and
10. A reintegration into one’s life based on conditions dictated by one’s new perspective (Baumgartner, 2012; Calleja, 2014; Christie et al., 2015; Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 2012).

At its essence, transformative learning gives context and structure to the process of how adults engage in meaning-making and personal change. It refers to the process by which people transform their taken-for-granted frames of reference (perspectives, habits of mind, mindsets) to make themselves more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove truer or more justified to guide their actions (Mezirow, 2012, p. 76). Learning involves testing the beliefs and perspectives
people hold to a new experience. The result is a reinforced, new, or revised interpretation of an experience that shapes future action. The hope and goal are to develop a new interpretation and corresponding action that moves people towards a more confident, expressed, and fulfilled version of themselves. Mezirow (2012) put forward the concept that individuals become critically reflective when their beliefs and frames of reference become problematic. They eventually arrive at a transformative insight, but this new perspective must be justified through discourse.

Mezirow first articulated transformative learning as a cognitive, rational, and analytical process in which one changes one’s worldview or undergoes a perspective transformation (Calleja, 2014; Hoggan, 2015; Howie & Bagnall, 2013; Kitchenham, 2008; Taylor, 2008; Taylor & Laros, 2014). Furthermore, to promote transformation, learners must become critically aware of how they view themselves in relation to the world, and understand that their underlying beliefs, assumptions, and values influence the interpretation of incoming information (Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 2012). By looking at each of these core concepts in more detail, researchers can come to understand how they work, where the challenges are, and how new approaches and applications can serve to deepen their understanding of transformative learning, and, more specifically, how embodied learning may contribute to it.

**Meaning-Making**

“As there are no fixed truths or totally definitive knowledge, and because circumstances change, the human condition may be best understood as a continuous effort to negotiate contested meanings” (Mezirow, 2012, p. 73). In Mezirow’s (2012) conception of transformative learning, contextual understanding and engaging in critical reflection on one’s assumptions of social, biographical, historical, and cultural constructs are important in the formation of
knowledge and belief. Each new event individuals experience is processed through learned frames of reference, or as Mezirow has also referred to them, meaning perspectives or meaning schemes. A frame of reference is composed of two dimensions: a habit of mind and a resulting point of view. A habit of mind is a set of assumptions that acts as a filter for interpreting the meaning of an experience. A habit of mind becomes expressed as a point of view, which, in turn, is a grouping of meaning schemes—the sets of expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and judgments that shape one's interpretation of an experience (Mezirow, 2012). In short, with each new experience, people attempt to create meaning through frames of reference, and the meaning they construct determines how they perceive themselves, and that in turn shapes the actions they take.

Personal identity and frames of reference are limited by the contextual conditions (Hoggan et al., 2017; Mezirow, 2012). The limits are imposed not by the experience itself, but by the meaning made of the experience. Each experience is interpreted through an existing meaning scheme, reinforcing what is already interpreted to be true. Christie et al. (2015) illustrated this influence within the university adult learning setting:

Mezirow’s theory can help adult educators and prospective school teachers understand that social structures and belief systems can influence student learning, that learners make meaning of their experiences in various ways which influence the sort of value systems they develop and that disorienting dilemmas often challenge the validity of one’s values and the assumptions that underpin them. (p. 9)

As noted earlier, self-perceptions and interpretations of personal experiences have an essential role in personal empowerment and transformative learning. As the basis for identity development and capacity building (Hassi & Laursen, 2015), they influence the meaning
schemes of adult learners, shifting them in one direction or another. When adult learners reinforce limiting beliefs about their abilities, skills, and sense of self, transformation and empowerment can still occur; it just requires changing the narrative and meaning scheme of the limiting experience as well as the context in which they were formed. To do so requires awareness through reflection.

**Critical Reflection and Transformation**

Critical reflection is an important element in perspective transformation. It can be described as cultivating the awareness of why people attach the meanings they do to an event and as such view that as reality. In perspective transformation, the reflection focuses on deeply held beliefs. This occurs when people are confronted with the realization that specific, often life-limiting, long-held beliefs no longer serve them. This coming to know how and why they hold certain beliefs may be the catalyst and beginning of transformation. It is a natural form of transformative learning that often occurs in adult life, especially during major life transitions and when the beliefs being held become problematic (Calleja, 2014; Hoggan, 2015; Howie & Bagnall, 2013; Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 2012; Taylor, 2008; Taylor & Laros, 2014).

Through this process, individuals begin to uncover the inaccuracies and distortions in their frames of reference, as well as the validity of their assumptions. Dramatic personal and social change now become possible, and at its core, this change points towards transformative learning.

Mezirow (2012) maintained that changes in habits of mind and transformative learning may be caused by a sudden, significant event in a person’s life. Alternatively, for some individuals, a profound change may evolve gradually. In both instances, Mezirow claimed that reflective learning results in a new or transformed sense of meaning perspectives for the

A mindful transformative learning experience requires that the learner make an informative and reflective decision to act on his or her reflective insight. This decision may result in immediate action, delayed action, or reasoned reaffirmation of an existing pattern of action. Taking action on reflective insights often involves overcoming situational, emotional and informational constraints that may require new learning experiences in order to move forward. As challenging one’s cherished beliefs (a leap into the unknown) often invokes a threatening emotional experience . . . freedom involves not just the will and insight to change but also the power to act to attain one’s purpose. (pp. 87–88)

Becoming critically aware of the assumptions at the root of one’s ideas may not be enough to facilitate a change in meaning schemes and beliefs. Transformative learning, especially when it involves reframing the view of oneself, can be an intense and threatening emotional experience. With this in mind, a person’s approach to transformative may require revising.

**Emotions and Fear in Transformative Learning**

Mezirow’s earliest approach to transformative learning theory has been criticized not only for its rationality but also for failing to include other ways of knowing (Christie et al., 2015; Howie & Bagnall, 2013; Taylor & Cranton, 2013). His view of transformative learning was considered—and in many ways, is still perceived—to be a rational process of learning that occurred strictly in the cognitive domain. Mezirow has since come to acknowledge the arts, dance, intuition, spirituality, and imagination as other ways of learning and expression,
contributing to ongoing and revised meaning-making (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 2012). As a result, adult learners are encouraged to explore all aspects of their frames of reference, including the advantages and disadvantages of the affective and intuitive dimensions (Mezirow, 2012). Recent literature has highlighted the emotional dimension in transformative learning (Baumgartner, 2012; Dirkx, 2006; Dirkx et al., 2006; Hoggan et al., 2017; Piercy, 2013; Taylor, 2008, 2009; Taylor & Cranton, 2013).

Recent research not only provides support that emotions can affect the processes of reason, but more importantly, emotions have been found to be indispensable for rationality to occur. . . . Research shows “emotions” anticipate future needs, prepare for actions and even prepare for thinking certain types of thoughts. . . . Without emotion, individuals are unable to co-ordinate their behaviour, respond to emergencies, prioritize goals, prepare for proper action and make progress towards goals. . . . Emotions can be understood as guiding the process of reasoning—or distorting them, depending on the describer’s assessment of the appropriateness. (Taylor, 2001, pp. 218–223)

Since Taylor’s work in 2001, recent scholarship in adult education has continued to reflect the revisioning of the role of emotions in transformative learning. Research in other areas of study, for example shame and resilience, has also highlighted the importance and impact of emotions on adult learners. This collective work has illustrated a more central and integral role emotions play in reason, rationality, learning, meaning-making, and the human experience (Brown, 2010; Cullen, Bloemker, Wyatt, & Walsh, 2017; Dirkx, 2006, 2008, 2012; Grams & Jurowetski, 2015; Hathaway, 2017; Hoggan et al., 2017; Lund & Chemi, 2015; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2006; Taylor & Cranton, 2012a; Walker, 2017). Adult learners can experience affect and emotion across the spectrum, from positive,
uplifting, and energizing to negative, distracting, and crippling (Dirkx, 2008). Emotions arise due to personal circumstances around family, relationships, or work, and individuals may experience learning-related emotional issues because of a history of intense experiences or trauma. These experiences evoke emotional reactions among learners. The challenge occurs when the anxiety of dealing with competing priorities, meeting expectations, or possible failure becomes overwhelming and leads to fear. Fear is an innate emotion and serves a protective function (LeDoux, 2012; Mobbs, Hagan, Dalgleish, Silston, & Prévost, 2015); however, it can be incredibly debilitating and hinder learning and transformation.

Mezirow (Dirkx et al., 2006) acknowledged that the transformative learning process involves coping with anxiety over the consequences of taking action. As noted earlier, these factors can operate at a less than conscious level. Rational discourse may not, and sometimes cannot, serve in drawing these factors to the surface. What is required is a new way of processing information that accesses other ways of learning. “Emotion-laden images mediate a conscious relationship with unconscious contents of our psyches” (Dirkx, 2006, p. 18). As Dirkx (2008) indicated, emotion-laden experiences can impact the transformational process through unconscious meaning-making, which harnesses imagination and intuition. Emotional experiences can bring on powerful transformation regardless of their inexactness, and despite their existing outside of the cognitive domain (Dirkx, 2008). Within adult learning the idea that the emotional self is embodied is also emerging; however, this perspective emphasizes more than just emotion as a bodily sensation. Embodied emotion, sensed through the physical instrument, arises from the experience itself and the meaning people make from it (Dirkx, 2008). This process, in essence, is embodied learning.
A New Way of Knowing: Embodied Transformation in Action

In the last 20 years, there has been a shift and evolution in the cognitive science, social science, and transformative learning worlds. In this new paradigm, people’s feelings, thoughts, desires, and environment play a greater role; and the one common denominator in all variations of the new theory is the role of the body in interacting with the brain, the environment, and the world.

Embodied learning has many conceptualizations, and what is emerging is a complex discussion to try to determine what embodiment is as a way of knowing (Freiler, 2008; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Merriam et al., 2006). Fundamentally, each definition positions embodied learning or knowing within or through the body rather than knowledge about or without the body. In each definition, similar terminology is used to define learning and knowledge that is gained through the senses, perceptions, and feelings that result from bodily involvement (Amann, 2003; Brendel & Bennett, 2016; Clark, 2001; Dirkx, 2008; Ergas, 2013; Freiler, 2008; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Lawrence, 2012; Lawrence, Nieves, Snowber, Kong, & Ntseane, 2013; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Miller-McLemore, 2013; Nguyen & Larson, 2015; Sodhi, 2008; Sodhi & Cohen, 2011).

Embodied learning is a way of knowing where people are connected to their bodies, their stories, and their communities (Lawrence et al., 2013). The sensations, social context, and knowledge of embodied learning can be encouraged and expressed in many ways. Much as fear of the unknown is the forefather of all fears (Carleton, 2016), intuition may be the oldest of all forms of embodied knowing.

Knowledge is often present in the body long before it reaches a person’s conscious awareness (Lawrence, 2012). It may present itself as a hunch, a nagging, or a “gut feeling.” A
corresponding physical sensation may be present; however, in every case there is a heightened awareness. This is intuition at work. Intuitive knowing is one of the most complex and misunderstood ways of knowing and is difficult to put into words and verbalize (Lawrence, 2012, p.5). Webster’s New World College Dictionary (2014) defined intuition as “the ability to perceive or know things without conscious reasoning” (para. 2). It is a way of knowing that goes beyond intellect and reason: “We think conscious thought is somehow better, when in fact, intuition is soaring flight compared to the plodding of logic” (De Becker, 1997, p. 28). Although Western cultures often dismiss or discount the power of intuition, De Becker’s (1997) quote illustrates an innate skill that is often ignored and may be of value in many settings. Intuitive knowledge may be accessed through active processes such as dance, yoga, martial arts, and physical activity. Dream interpretation and meditation offer processes to access less-than-conscious or concrete knowledge; walking in nature or choosing to immerse oneself in a vibrant workspace offer opportunities for the environment to influence intuition (Lawrence, 2012). These processes all rely on the body as a site and source of knowing and are just a few examples of accessing inner wisdom through physical engagement.

Engaging with one’s body through artistic forms of expression or general physical activity can be a way for a person to get in touch with hidden knowledge. “When we inhabit our bodies fully, no matter what vocation is in our lives, we are able to integrate the fullness of our intelligence. . . . And in this place we encounter the deep wisdom of our bodies” (Snowber, 2012, p. 59). Dance, improvisation, and other forms of physical movement are marked by expressivity as well as meaning. Dance in particular invites individuals to build a relationship with their bodies and tell stories through it. It provides an opportunity make connections to the multiple sensations around and within the body, to provoke emotions, and to act as muscle of the
imagination in the creative process (Snowber, 2012). Dance can also promote a return to the place where people lose their inhibitions and self-consciousness of their bodies (Snowber, 2012).

For those whose physical and life experiences have made them inhibited and self-conscious, negatively impacting their confidence and view of themselves, they must be given the opportunity to reexamine, rediscover, and rewrite their embodied identities in an empowered way. They must reengage in the self-discovery process with a different method and in a different context. Much like dancers who explore their emotions, build relationships with their bodies, and express themselves through their bodies, these individuals need to engage in a learning experience that promotes reflection and expression, in an environment that is tailored or suited to their needs. They must explore a different form of experiential learning.

Experiential learning is governed by a simple idea: By being physically involved in an event, a learner is doing very thing he or she is learning about (Howden, 2012). In experiential learning, multiple aspects of the person are engaged: logic, reason, creativity, intuition, emotions, and reflection. Learners are placed in environments where physical challenges can present as intimidating and frightening. The mind becomes active and begins to bring up old experiences of failure; fear and doubt begin to set in. However, once individuals realize that they are overthinking the situation—that the situation is in fact not beyond their abilities, that they are truly capable, and it is their meaning-making minds that are sending them messages that hinder success—they engage with their bodies and find that their confidence increases with each small physical success (Howden, 2012; Lawrence, 2012). The outcomes are often meaningful and personal.

Embodying an experience can be a way not only to make knowledge accessible, but also to make meaning empowering. The use of embodied knowing is far reaching and extends beyond
dance and experiential learning. It is being used in artificial intelligence, mathematics, and mixed reality, where digital and physical environments are blended together (Chrisley, 2003; Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg, 2013). As a transformative intervention, embodied learning is being harnessed in education, health care, social work, psychiatry, trauma treatment, neuroscience, business and management, leadership, and social science (Arnette & Pettijohn, 2012; Brendel & Bennett, 2016; Oppezzo & Schwartz, 2014; Rigg, 2017; Scheele, 2015; Sodhi & Cohen, 2011; Swartz, 2010; Yoo & Loch, 2016). A growing trend is the use of yoga interventions as part of the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and/or trauma recovery process (Cook-Cottone, LaVigne, Guyker, Travers, & Lemish, 2017; Emmerson, Sharma, Chaudhry, & Turner, 2009; Macy, Jones, Graham, & Roach, 2015; Rhodes, 2014, 2015). These applications reflect an evolution around the concepts of embodied learning, wellness, and empowerment. Within this evolution, there is an opportunity to utilize and develop approaches that incorporate concepts from ancient traditions into Western contemporary health practices.

Self-Care: The Merging of Ancient and Western Practices Through Embodied Learning

Throughout history, humankind has practiced self-care in order to prevent illness, cure disease, or promote health. In its earliest and most primitive forms, self-care was ruled by superstition, where rituals were performed to exercise demons or holes were drilled into the skull to relieve headaches caused by evil spirits (Duffin, 2010; Forrester, 2016; Sutcliffe & Duin, 1992). As knowledge grew through observation and experimentation, self-care evolved into an empirical discipline grounded in the science of the mind and body. Self-care can be defined as individuals engaging in activities to develop their mind, body, and overall well-being, and it has become a central practice in Western society (Alftberg & Hansson, 2012; Bhuyan, 2004; Bressi & Vaden, 2017; McCormack, 2003; Silva et al., 2009). These self-care behaviours allow one to
function more fully in daily life and contribute to one’s ability to perform a variety of tasks, which range from ensuring survival to achieving self-actualization (Alftberg & Hansson, 2012; Bressi & Vaden, 2017; McCormack, 2003).

Although no longer dominated by superstition and dogma, self-care is still influenced by individual, cultural, and societal beliefs. Differences in Western and ancient approaches to healing exist today. Western practices of healing often follow verifiable protocols supported by empirical research. Ancient models use techniques based on traditions that have been embraced for generations. In more recent times, people in the Western world have been turning to holistic forms of healing, some of which are based on ancient practices. As mentioned, yoga has been used for stress reduction and trauma treatment (Cook-Cottone et al., 2017; Emmerson et al., 2009; Macy et al., 2015; Rhodes, 2014, 2015). The use of mindfulness for similar purposes has also gained popularity (Davis & Hayes, 2011; Fischer, 2017; Goodman & Calderón, 2012; Price et al., 2017; Vujanovic, Niles, Pietrefesa, Schmertz, & Potter, 2011), and a 2012 survey by the U.S. National Institute of Health found that 33.2% of American adults use holistic health practices (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, 2017). This trend of merging traditional and nontraditional perspectives may change how individuals look at transformation and personal well-being.

The blending of philosophies has appeared in cancer treatment (Cassileth, 2011), and Ramos (2018) offered a model where dance and movement therapy (DMT) is integrated with shamanic healing ritual. In the model, Ramos proposed that shamanism, the practice of communicating or connecting with a greater life and healing force, shares the concept of an innate healing intelligence within our physical bodies. With DMT, by integrating the two practices, the body’s natural healing mechanisms can be harnessed in new and unique ways.
Accordingly, other ancient healing philosophies such as the chakras, can be utilized to impact Western transformational work. I discuss my use of the chakras in developing the case for the study in more detail in the next chapter.

**Summary**

In this literature review I provided an overview of what transformative learning is, how it occurs, and what its core concepts are. Despite a lack of consensus on a clear definition of transformative learning, most researchers would agree that the research and attention that embodied learning is drawing represents a fundamental shift in how people understand themselves and their relationship with the world (Lawrence, 2012; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Taylor & Cranton, 2012a, 2013). The literature review reflects that shift and provides some ideas of what a definition of transformative learning may look like in the future.

I also offered a deeper discussion of transformative learning’s core concepts, the role of emotions in embodied learning, and what embodied learning is, and provided examples of transformative embodied learning in practice. I ended with an introduction to the Western concept of self-care and ancient practices. The merging of these two forms, as expressed through and in addition to embodied learning, provided the theoretical foundation and method of embodied learning for this thesis. The intent was to position the body and physical movement in the transformational experience by providing individuals with a new avenue for reflection, growth, and transformation.

Chapter 3 includes an overview of qualitative research, a case study as my chosen methodology, the methods I chose for data collection and analysis, and my participant selection process. A discussion on validity and ethical considerations is also included.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Differences between research styles do not necessarily make one better than another. Rather, one research approach may prove more suited at given problem than another. . . .

In planning any research, it is essential to choose the investigative approach that best promises to match the problem and its setting and to result in the most believable and dependable solution. (Mauch & Park, 2003, p. 22)

The goal of this study was to understand how individuals may critically reflect, learn, and potentially make empowered meanings about themselves through physical acts of self-care. The contextual nature of this inquiry supported the use of a qualitative research approach; specifically, a single interpretive case study based primarily on the methodologies described by Merriam (2009b). The participants were embedded within the single interpretive case, each with their own unique experiences of the case, and are in essence the units of study or analysis (Merriam, 2009b; Yin, 2012). I considered my personal experiences in the topic of study, philosophical orientation, research questions, and purpose when selecting the most appropriate methodology. In this chapter, I offer an overview of my philosophical orientation and qualitative research methodology. I draw on the theoretical underpinnings of Yin (2010, 2012, 2014), Merriam (2009b), and Stake (2014) to justify the rationale for a holistic, interpretive, experiential case study design. As well, I discuss the single case study approach and outline the research design, including the selection of case, the selection of participants, and data collection and analysis.

Overview of Philosophical Foundation and Research Methodology

Philosophical foundation. In this section I outline the epistemology underlying my motivations in this research. Creswell (2009) used the term worldview to describe the set of
beliefs that guide one’s general orientation to the world and the nature of the research that the researcher will approach. Worldviews are shaped by the discipline area of the student, the beliefs of the advisor and faculty within the student’s area of research, and the researcher’s past experiences (Creswell, 2009).

The epistemology/worldview framing this qualitative research was interpretivism, a term that is often used interchangeably with constructivism (Merriam, 2009b). Within this paradigm, there is no single, observable reality. Instead, interpretivism asserts that different people construct different, subjective meanings, even when experiencing the same event, and these subjective meanings are gained through social interactions (Merriam, 2009b). As such, reality is then socially constructed, where there are multiple interpretations and experiences of a single event (Check & Schutt, 2012; Creswell, 2009, 2012; Merriam, 2009b).

My research aimed to understand what role the human body and physical movement serve in transformational learning. My hope was to interpret the participants’ perceptions and experiences to better understand their perspectives. As noted earlier, new conceptions within transformative learning are emerging (Merriam, 2009b; Taylor & Cranton, 2012a). By learning more about how individuals explore and experience themselves through their bodies, the understanding of the relationship between transformative and embodied learning may be expanded.

**Qualitative research.** “Research is a process of steps to collect and analyze information to increase our understanding of a topic or issue” (Creswell, 2015, p. 2). Both quantitative and qualitative research can be utilized to tell a meaningful story through the data analysis and findings; however, the data they collect and the methods used to analyze them differ significantly (Check & Schutt, 2012). Quantitative research is an approach to research design that focuses on
testing objective theories by studying the relationships among variables (Creswell, 2009). It is often described as a “hard” science and examines numeric data through statistical procedures; and where objectivity is maintained throughout the research process (Creswell, 2009; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). The purpose statements and hypotheses are usually stated in advance, and provide direction for the research questions (Creswell, 2015; Suter, 2012). The writing of the research report and presentation of the results also follows an ethical, open and accurate approach (Check & Schutt, 2012).

Conversely, qualitative research focuses on exploration, description, understanding, and interpretation (Creswell, 2015; Merriam, 2009b). It is an approach to understanding the meaning people have constructed in an effort to make sense of their world and their experiences in it (Merriam, 2009b). Qualitative research occurs in natural and situational settings. Researchers are able to discover how people cope and thrive in that unique environment, capturing the contextual nature of their everyday lives (Merriam, 2009b; Stake, 2014). The researcher is acknowledged as an integral data collection instrument, collecting data through observing behaviour, examining documents, and interviewing (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009b; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2012, 2014). The social background, assumptions, and biases of the researcher can influence the process, making it a personal experience. This attunes the researcher to the reflexive nature of the research that is being conducted. The researcher considered questions such as, “How will I represent myself in the research process?” “How have my personal experiences, values, and biases influenced the research questions I have selected as well as the data I collect and analyze?” “How are the voices of the participants acknowledged and represented?”

Qualitative research is also an interpretive inquiry, where researchers interpret what they see, hear, and understand to identify themes and the larger meaning of the findings. Finally,
qualitative research is an inductive process filled with rich description. Qualitative researchers gather data to build concepts or theories rather than deductively testing a hypothesis. They also rely on their intuitive understanding of the information from first-hand field experience. Words and pictures from the interviews, observations, and documents, rather than numbers, are often used to convey what the researcher has learned about the event. Quotes from interviews, excerpts from documents, and detailed descriptions of the context and participants involved also contribute to the descriptive nature of qualitative research (Creswell, 2012, 2015; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Mauch & Park, 2003; Merriam, 2009b; Stake, 2014; Yin, 2010).

**Research Methodology: Qualitative Case Study**

Qualitative case study served as the methodology for this study. This section describes the background of case study research and my rationale for its use. Case study research is a flexible research approach that allows researchers to explore and analyze diverse and complex issues across different disciplines and in their real-world settings (Creswell, 2009, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017; Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014; Merriam, 2009b; Ponelis, 2015; Yin, 2012, 2014). Cases within their real-world context are separated out by time, place, event, program, or individual; this separation is known as bounding (Creswell, 2015; Merriam, 2009b). Harrison et al. (2017) stressed that bounding is necessary to focus, frame, and manage the collection and analysis of data within the case. The insights arising from a qualitative approach can be used in advancing a body of knowledge and further research within a particular field (Merriam, 2009b). Many prominent researchers have contributed to the methodological developments of case study (Creswell, 2012, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Hyett et al., 2014; Merriam, 2009b; Stake, 2014; Yin, 2010). Each offers a distinct approach to case study methodology. For this thesis, I relied primarily on the outlines

Yin’s (2014) case study design appeared to be grounded in a postpositivist approach to research; he defined case study as a form of empirical inquiry and focused on maintaining objectivity within the study design (Harrison et al., 2017). In comparison, Stake’s (1995, 2006, 2014) approach to case study research has reflected a constructivist-interpretivist orientation. This approach has been rooted in discovering meaning and understanding experiences in their context (Harrison et al., 2017). The researcher is also interactive, participates in the study, and is viewed as the main research instrument. The issues and discovery of meaning emerge from the participants’ accounts, and within the interpretations, there is preference for natural language (Stake, 1995, 2006, 2014).

Like Stake (1995, 2006, 2014), Merriam (2009b) also maintained a constructivist-interpretivist approach to case study research, whereby the researcher assumes that reality is socially constructed. Merriam (2009b) believed that it is important to use processes and procedures that help interpret, sort, and manage information within the study. Processes such as descriptive, thematic, and content analysis, and triangulation, ensure that case study research and the findings within it are manageable, rigorous, applicable, and credible (Harrison et al., 2017; Merriam, 2009b). As with Yin (2010, 2012, 2014) and Stake (1995, 2006, 2014), she viewed the case as a phenomenon that occurs as a bounded system. Merriam (2009b) acknowledged that case study research can use both quantitative and qualitative methods; however, with qualitative case studies prioritization is given to interpretation rather than testing hypotheses (Harrison et al. 2017). Cases are selected based on the research purpose and question(s), and for what they could
reveal about the topic of study. Interviews are the most common form of qualitative data collection (see also Harrison et al., 2017).

Merriam (2009b) conceived of qualitative case study as “holistic description and explanation” (p. 43). Case study, as she described, has distinctive attributes: particularistic (it focuses on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon), descriptive (it yields a rich, thick description of the phenomenon under study), and heuristic (it illuminates the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon under study). As with Yin (2012), Merriam (2009b) identified case study as a design suited to situations in which separating the phenomenon’s variables from the context is not achievable or blurred.

**Single case approach.** My next step was to select the case study design (Yin, 2012, 2014). In this step I determined whether the best approach was a single or multiple case study (Yin, 2012). Yin (2012), Stake (2006), and Merriam (2009b) each provided outlines, descriptions, and criteria for selecting a single or multiple case study format; all acknowledged that multiple cases design is more difficult to implement and manage than single case design. Yin (2012, 2014), however, advocated for a multiple case approach because it allows the researcher to draw better comparisons from the data, which then provides greater confidence in the findings and conclusions. Merriam (2009b) acknowledged that the multiple case approach can enhance the external validity and generalizability of the findings, but she, along with Stake (2006), highlighted and seemed to stress the benefits of single case design because of its more manageable approach and because of the reader’s ability to learn and develop new meaning through the researcher’s rich, holistic account of the phenomenon.

As Stake (2006) explained,
In multi-case study research, the single case is of interest because . . . the individual cases share a common characteristic or condition. The cases in the collection are somehow categorically bound together. They may be members of a group or examples of a phenomenon. (pp. 5–6)

This statement complements Merriam’s (2009b) assertion that by concentrating on a single case, the researcher’s aim is to uncover the interaction of significant factors that are characteristic of the event or condition.

With these considerations in mind, I chose a single interpretive case study based on the philosophical underpinnings and methodologies described by Merriam (2009b), with some considerations from Stake (1995, 2006, 2014). Merriam’s (2009b) step-by-step process for designing qualitative case study research provided an excellent framework for me as a new researcher.

**Participants and recruitment.** I used a combination of recruitment strategies to identify the five participants for my study. This small number made data collection within the study time frame more manageable and made exploring the individual participant experiences more effective. The case was not bound by a specific institution or location, which made the selection process easier. The study was open to adults between the ages of 18 and 64 (my participants ranged in age from 31 to 57); all individuals, male and female, had an equal chance of being selected. Although the scope of the study could accommodate individuals who were not physically active, none applied. All the participants who were selected were already physically active and had some familiarity with the benefits of exercise.

Criteria for participation were that individuals were willing to explore the benefits of exercise, understand the connection to learning and empowerment, and journal about their
experience over a 6-week period. An additional selection criterion that also functioned as a safety measure was passing the physical activity readiness questionnaire (PAR-Q), designed to determine whether an individual is physically ready to begin exercising (University of Waterloo, 2002). I also held a precautionary conversation with participants regarding their familiarity with proper exercise techniques prior to commencing the study.

I used convenience sampling (Creswell, 2015), the selection of participants who are willing and able to be studied, as my initial recruitment strategy. I reached out with personalized emails to my network through my personal email list, work email list, Facebook, and workplace colleagues at fitness facilities I am associated with. I sent the recruitment form (see Appendix A) to those who expressed interest. I then used snowball sampling (Creswell, 2015), where participants are asked to identify other prospective participants for the study in question, by asking my contacts to extend the invitation to their networks. Given that most people in my network are physically active, the probability was high that potential participants would already be physically active.

From my initial recruitment strategy, 30 individuals responded with interest in participating in my study. To gauge the level of their interest, I contacted them by email, phone, or Facebook Messenger to discuss the scope and purpose of the study. Prior to this call, I emailed them the study questionnaire (see Appendix B), which I discuss in detail below, so they could familiarize themselves with the study process. I also emailed them the consent form, some exercise and safety tips (see Appendices C and D, respectively), and the PAR-Q to provide more information. I advised participants of their right to withdraw, both verbally and within the recruitment notice and letter of consent. From the 30 who were initially interested, 21 elected not to participate. Of the nine remaining participants, four began the study and then elected to
withdraw within the first few weeks for personal reasons. In the end, data were collected from five participants who finished the 6-week study, completed the questionnaire, and had a final interview. Because some of the participants began the study and then stopped, recruitment occurred in two rounds.

**Case development.** Self-care is not a new concept. Throughout history it has been practiced in many different cultures and in many different forms. Current conceptions of self-care can be traced back to various social movements from the 1930s to the 1970s, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, ParticipACTION, and the women’s movement (Alftberg & Hansson, 2012; Bhuyan, 2004; McCormack, 2003; Silva et al., 2009). Self-care activities have also been influenced by a need to address limitations within the health care system on the delivery of patient care (Alftberg & Hansson, 2012; Bhuyan, 2004; McCormack, 2003; Silva et al., 2009). The renewed interest to exercise more control over one’s health is rooted in the societal values of autonomy, self-determination, and independence in both health and illness (Alftberg & Hansson, 2012; Bhuyan, 2004; McCormack, 2003). These values have carried over into other wellness professions, one of which is life coaching.

Life coaching serves to support people in enhancing their well-being, improving their personal functioning, and creating meaningful change (Abravanel & Gavin, 2017; Griffiths, 2006, 2015; Jarosz, 2016). Clients are encouraged to develop all areas of life and well-being, including career, health, environment, finances, business, family, relationships, and leisure (Abravanel & Gavin, 2017; Griffiths, 2006, 2015; Jarosz, 2016). Life coaching also supports the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth of an individual (Abravanel & Gavin, 2017; Griffiths, 2006, 2015; Jarosz, 2016).
Learning, motivation autonomy, and behaviour change are inherent within the coaching process, and when considering the function and process of coaching as a whole, there is a strong connection to Mezirow’s stages of transformation (Griffiths, 2006, 2015). As a certified life coach, certified professional trainer, and wellness instructor, I relied heavily on the philosophical underpinnings of life coaching and self-care in the formation the case for this thesis.

The case and data collection. The case for this study was a 6-week physical self-care program in which participants engaged in physical activity and then critically reflected on their experience. Participants used a questionnaire consisting of a pre-study assessment, the six different concepts of self-care/empowerment explored during the 6-week program, and a post-study assessment (see Appendix B) to facilitate their reflection. Upon completion of the post-study assessment, I conducted semistructured interviews. The questionnaire and interviews were my main methods of data collection, with over 100 pages of text collected in total.

I developed the questionnaire, and it was influenced by my professional experiences and personal interests, which include group exercise instruction, individual and group strength training, martial arts instruction, healthy weight management and behaviour change coaching, corporate wellness, holistic living, and meditation. I used the chakras and their conceptual meanings as a guide when developing the program. Found within the ancient practices of yoga and meditation, the seven chakras are energy centres throughout the body, which are believed to keep individuals vibrant and healthy (Fernros, Furhoff, & Wandell, 2008; Hay & Schulz, 2013; Priyal & Ramkumar, 2016; Scelba, 1998; Solorzano, 2012). Each of the chakras corresponds to a specific psychological, emotional, and spiritual state of being. The seven chakras are red base chakra, which corresponds to basic needs; orange navel chakra, corresponding to emotions and feeling; yellow solar plexus chakra, corresponding to power and self-achievement skills; green
heart chakra, corresponding to love, membership, and belonging; blue throat chakra, corresponding to communication; purple “third eye” chakra, corresponding to insight, intuition, and self-reflection; and white top of head chakra, corresponding to transcendence (Fernros et al., 2008; Scelba, 1998; Solorzano, 2012). Although the 6-week program did not follow the seven chakras exactly, it did reflect their concepts. The chakras and their conceptual psychological, emotional, and spiritual meanings offered me, in this study, a framework to explore critical self-reflection. Integrating them with and into self-care through physical movement created a method to explore transformative learning through the body.

The case, which in many ways was a detailed account of how the data were collected, began with the preprogram assessment to set a baseline. This assessment was inspired by an often-used coaching tool, the life wheel assessment (see Appendix E), which incorporates a rating system for the different areas of life. Its purpose is to help the coach and client establish meaningful goals for the client, understand the personal challenges the client faces, and create a starting point for an action plan. Within the preprogram assessment, participants rated their level of satisfaction for each of the six concepts of self-care/personal empowerment explored in the study on a scale of 1 (very dissatisfied) to 10 (fully satisfied and expressed). I included open-ended questions to help participants clarify their motivation for participating in the study, gauge their perceived relationship with their body, identify the challenges to prioritizing personal self-care, and clarify the potential impact improved self-care would have on their lives. The 6-week self-care questionnaire based on the chakras and their meanings followed the preprogram assessment.

The inspiration to weave the concepts of the chakras into the physical self-care program came from two sources: (a) personal experiences in yoga classes and mediation, and (b)
reflecting on how to promote an emotional or spiritual experience through a physical activity. A practice within yoga and meditations is to “cleanse” one’s chakras—which involves one or a combination of physical movement, visualization of a healing white light, and breathing to remove the impurities blocking a chakra’s energy. Energetic or emotional blocks within a chakra are believed not only to block success in that chakra’s corresponding area of life, but also to promote specific illnesses related to each chakra (Fernros et al., 2008; Hay & Schulz, 2013; Priyal & Ramkumar, 2016; Scelba, 1998; Solorzano, 2012). Thus, I combined the conceptual meanings of the chakras with physical acts of self-care to create a practice where mind, body, emotions, and spirit could interact. In short, my intention of blending an ancient holistic practice with Western ideas of critical reflection and self-care was to create a structure that promoted an embodied, transformational experience for the participants.

Prior to commencing, I briefed the participants on the questionnaire, giving them an opportunity ask any questions or clarify concerns about the structure, intent, and expectations of the study. During these preliminary phone conversations, everyone indicated that the questionnaire looked straightforward. Minimal guidelines for physical activity each week were discussed verbally as well as in the recruitment document and consent form (see Appendices A and C, respectively). I informed participants that they had the freedom to answer questions as they saw fit and to reach out to me with questions at any time. They could write their responses free hand or type into the document provided. Each of the concepts within the 6-week guide are as follows:

1) Week 1: Self-care—attending to oneself and balancing one’s own needs with the needs of others as the foundation.

2) Week 2: Safety and support from others.
3) Week 3: Creative personal expression and joy.

4) Week 4: Sense of self and personal achievement skills (confidence, self-esteem, self-worth).

5) Week 5: Self-love, accepting love, compassion, and inner peace.


Each week, the participants engaged in a minimum of two episodes of physical activity ranging from 30 to 60 minutes and with a minimum exertion of 9 on the Borg Scale of Perceived Exertion (9 = very light, 13 = somewhat hard, 17 = very heavy, 20 = maximal exertion; see Appendix D). The exercise was chosen at the participant’s discretion. Examples of activities included a mind–body group exercise class such as yoga, a more vigorous group exercise class such as indoor cycling, an individualized resistance training program, walking, and jogging. Within 1 hour of engaging in physical activity, I asked participants to journal about their experience using the questionnaire. Much like the preprogram assessment, I included ratings questions specific to the self-care focus for each week. I also asked open-ended questions to facilitate participants’ critical reflection on their goals, strengths, challenges, thoughts, and emotions from practicing self-care. I included a weekly observation section after the open-ended questions to capture additional thoughts and insights that the open-ended questions may not have addressed. One participant forwarded her material to me every two weeks, whereas the remaining participants forwarded their material at the end of the six weeks and after completing the poststudy assessment.

The poststudy assessment provided a comparison for pre- and poststudy change. For example, Questions 1 and 6 were the same in both assessments, asking participants about the importance of taking time for themselves, the relationship they had with their body, and what
benefits physical activity provided for them. This assessment also included open-ended questions to capture observations and insights about the entire experience, the role their body and self-care played in promoting personal empowerment, the perceived impact, and what perceived changes occurred. The development of the poststudy assessment and the use of open-ended questions throughout the study was inspired by a post-session recap questionnaire that I have used with private coaching clients (see Appendix F).

Once participants had completed the questionnaire, I ended the case with a post-study interview to gain further insight on the participants’ study experiences, and to gather additional data for validity. All five participants agreed to be interviewed. I sent the interview questions (see Appendix G) prior to commencing so they could familiarize themselves with the questions and reconnect with their experience of the study. Interview questions were semistructured to address the overarching intent of study with some similarity and consistency while also giving me flexibility to follow the direction of the discussion as necessary and explore unanticipated themes and directions. The interview questions expanded on the questions from the case (pre-, post- and 6-week questionnaires).

Participants were informed through email and verbally prior to commencing that they could answer questions to the degree they felt comfortable and decline to answer any questions if they wished. Two interviews were conducted in person and three were conducted over the phone. I agreed to interview times that were convenient for participants to show them that the focus was on them and that their participation was greatly appreciated. Interviews lasted approximately 15 to 20 minutes, were audiotaped with the permission of the participants, and were transcribed verbatim through a transcription service.
I conducted interviews carefully to ensure the reliability of study. I intentionally did not ask demographic questions on sexual orientation, marital status, education, or level of household income. This was done to maintain the comfort and trust of the participants during the interview. They were free to share that information if they felt comfortable doing so.

As the researcher I shared information about myself—my motivations for engaging in the study, the intent of the study, my work history, etc., to establish the trust and rapport necessary for the conversation. Active listening and nonjudgmental behaviour are two common skills for a life coach. It was essential to apply these skills when conducting the interviews to maintain the trust and rapport I had established with the participants. All the participants sounded at ease during the interviews.

**Data Analysis**

The research question in this study required a holistic approach to my analysis and was guided by the theoretical frameworks of embodied and transformative learning. To ensure accuracy and minimize bias, I established three goals to guide the data analysis process: (a) preserve the participants’ personal accounts within the case by using their wording for the thematic analysis; (b) condense the raw data from each participant’s account into categories and themes; and (c) identify the relationship of the categories and themes to the research question and subquestions. Only after the data were coded would I attempt to derive conclusions about the participants’ experiences, or formulate suggestions or solutions as to how they relate to embodied and transformational learning.

**Development of codes and themes.** As noted earlier, I collected data from the pre-, post- and 6-week questionnaire, and from the poststudy interview. As I moved into data analysis, I used five steps, derived from Merriam’s (2009b) approach to analyzing and reporting data, to
create a structure for the process. Data analysis began with a first reading of the participants’ answers to the questionnaire from beginning to end. The purpose was to familiarize myself with the data and to allow uninhibited intuitions, thoughts, and feelings to occur. I also read through the transcribed verbatim notes of the participants’ poststudy interviews for the same purpose.

I then conducted a second reading to develop categories and themes for each individual participant. I reviewed each questionnaire and interview transcript in turn to look for significant statements and words that indicated categories and themes within that individual’s experience. In essence, this was an effort to identify the participant’s “story.” This step helped to identify participant profiles, their motivation for participating, what benefit or change they had intended to accomplish, what they learned, and how their perceptions and self-awareness had potentially shifted. I highlighted significant words or phrases that were repeated or were stressed as important by the participant.

After a third reading, I colour coded the significant statements and phrases and assigned them to categories. Repeated words, or words that expressed a thought, emotion, insight, or challenge, were assigned to a category. I considered the frequency of words or concepts, and their similarities and differences, when assigning them to categories. Further readings involved even more scrutiny in order to add or adjust to the established categories. Within each reading, I cut and pasted important words, statements, and repeated words into a separate document under the specified categories. This document was considered the emerging theme document. When the accounts in the questionnaires were handwritten by the participants, I followed a similar process of transcribing the key concepts into the document. The combination of the second and third readings resulted in themes for each of the participants, which I wrote at the end of the rough draft of their profiles.
I began the fourth step by rereading of the rough draft profiles and the emerging theme document, and comparing the themes at the end of each profile. This was the beginning of my thematic analysis. I continually referred to the three goals guiding the data analysis process as I reviewed the profiles, interviews, questionnaires, and emerging theme document throughout the thematic analysis for verification and accuracy.

In the fifth step, I compared my data and emerging themes to Mezirow’s (2012) conception of transformative learning. I measured the data and themes derived from the participant interviews and questionnaires against Mezirow’s view of transformative learning to see if the results met the criteria of transformative learning. These five steps of analysis of the pre- and poststudy assessments, Weeks 1 to 6 of the individual cases, and the semistructured interviews resulted in coding of themes within and amongst the participants.

Validity. To establish validity, Creswell (2009) and Merriam (2009b) suggested using multiple verification strategies, which include prolonged engagement in collecting data and persistent observation; triangulation; peer review or debriefing; researcher reflexivity/clarification of researcher bias; member checks; rich, thick descriptions; and external audits.

In this study, I used three methods to establish consistency and trustworthiness. The first was participant consultation to verify my interpretation of their profiles to confirm the accuracy of the descriptions. The second was data triangulation via the questionnaire, interviews, and the data analysis methods described earlier. The final method I used to establish validity was to confer with my thesis advisor on the interpretations of the data I came up with.
Ethical Considerations

Policies, guidelines, and codes of ethics set out by governments, institutions, and professional associations set standards to which researchers must adhere. In the case of post-secondary research, institutions also act to approve research proposals. Following the University of Calgary’s Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board graduate research protocols, I detailed the structure of my study in a thesis proposal and within it described the ethical considerations. I applied for and was granted ethics approval to proceed.

An informed consent form was provided to each participant. It outlined the purpose, research methods, expectations, and what personal information would be collected. This information was expressed verbally as well. All participants reviewed and signed this document. Participation was voluntary, and it was made explicit that participants could withdraw from the study at any time and decline to answer specific questions in the questionnaire and interview. Additional measures for safety and ethics included the PAR-Q (University of Waterloo, 2002), which determines whether an individual is physically ready to begin exercising, and the Borg Scale of Perceived Exertion, which helps participants identify the intensity level they are working at and, if necessary, adjust accordingly.

In qualitative studies, ethical issues may emerge with the collection of data and interpretation of findings (Merriam, 2009b). Participants were guaranteed that their responses would remain anonymous by providing generic identifiers to maintain confidentiality. No personal names have been included in the final results. Participants were comfortable with the primary forms of data collection, journalling and a poststudy interview.
I stored the printed materials in a locked firebox in my office, and any digital material was stored on my password-protected computer. The raw data, both digital and printed, will be destroyed after 2 years.

Summary

In this chapter I outlined my philosophical orientation, qualitative research methodology, and case study and single case research methodologies. I also included my process for participant selection, my data collection and analysis procedures, and data credibility considerations. My research design was a single case interpretive case study that primarily followed Merriam’s (2009b) criteria. I analyzed the data through the qualitative methods of a questionnaire and an interview. In the next chapter I detail the results and their analysis.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents the 6-week self-care journey of the participants and the themes I derived from their experiences. I selected quotes based on their clarity, representativeness of each participant’s experiences, and the themes that emerged from the analysis. In a few instances, quotes have been slightly altered for readability. However, the edits were done in such a way that they did not alter the essence or meaning of what the participant intended to communicate. I designed this study to explore the relationship between embodied experiences and their applicability to transformative learning. The purpose was to discover if and how people find an empowered sense of themselves through their bodies and physical self-care.

As detailed in Chapter 1, guiding subquestions for the study included the following:

1. What enhances or promotes embodied learning, which can then help one find an empowered sense of self?

2. What role does the human body serve in transformational learning?

In the first section I provide participant profiles, including their motivations for starting and finishing the study, and what they hoped to gain from the experience. I have used participant numbers rather than names to ensure anonymity. The second section is my thematic analysis. I used the two subquestions listed above to guide the process of uncovering the three main themes. Finally, I illustrate what participants discovered about themselves after the six weeks and the role their bodies and physical self-care played in their learning.

A review of the concepts for the 6-week guide are as follows:

- Week 1: Self-care—attending to oneself and balancing one’s own needs with the needs of others as the foundation.

- Week 2: Safety and support from others.
• Week 3: Creative personal expression and joy.
• Week 4: Sense of self and personal achievement skills (confidence, self-esteem, self-worth).
• Week 5: Self-love, accepting love, compassion, and inner peace.
• Week 6: Communication and self-expression of feelings and personal needs.

Participants: Personal Stories of Motivation and Transformation

Participant 1 is a 42-year-old married father of three. He enjoys time working out, meditating, learning about spirituality, and thinking about what contributes to happiness in life. At the age of 24 he decided on masonry as his full-time work until he discovered more of his purpose and how it would be reflected in his career. He has since started up a business, coaching others on how to overcome anxiety and live a fulfilling life. Participant 1 has had anxiety his whole life. When he was asked if he would consider participating in my study, he was having panic attacks almost every day. He was at a point where he was willing to try anything to find a way to reconnect with himself and find meaning in what he was experiencing. In his pre-study questionnaire, he described wanting to work on aligning his mindset with his intentions. More specifically, he wanted to create new habits that did not contradict his goals and release limiting habits and beliefs that were hindering his empowerment. Once he began the study, he discovered physical activity was a method to connect with, and change, his mental and emotional state, and as a result he felt more powerful:

When I did the physical activity, my anxiety went away. So, it almost brought out this different emotional level inside me that kind of . . . I got rid of some negative emotions. It almost brought me to a place of empowerment. (Participant 1)
Participant 1 defined transformation as “raising your standards in life and never go back to a lower quality of life.” When asked if this experienced had changed him, he stated “absolutely.” Participation in the study initiated reflection and action and challenged him “to now find a different sort of meaning and focus on what was happening to me.” With respect to habit change, he discovered that “deep core beliefs cannot only be changed, [but] the body plays a key role in making this a success.” As such, he was more focused on his body and the impact of self-care as a tool for increasing his empowerment, joy, happiness, and energy; managing his anxiety; and shifting his state of mind. By the end of the study he came to a place where “thinking I should do it turned into a must find time to follow through.” He summarized what he discovered and experienced in the following statement:

It means that in order for me to transform, I’ve got to put my body into a powerful state. I’ve got to stand tall, I got to keep my shoulders back, I got to breathe in deep, I got to smile. So, I’m using every single in muscle in my body, in my face, to bring power to movement, to make me feel strong. So, I’ve really learned that through the experience, your body is just as powerful as the mind. You’re controlling a lot of the things that you want to do. So, it’s almost like I’ve learned that it’s another element in bringing my life to where I need it to be, to feel more fulfilled, and strong and more powerful. (Participant 1)

Participant 2 is a 44-year-old mother of three. She works part-time as a health and wellness coach four days a week, which allows her time to balance work, kids, family, and personal fulfillment activities. After completing high school, she and her mother began running a gym, and from that point on Participant 2 has always been physically active and interested in the link between physical fitness and wellness. Over the years she has had some depression and
anxiety, and as such she has strived to find opportunities to better her mood, well-being, and daily functioning. Participant 2’s motivations to participate in and finish the study were to practice and improve self-care, self-love, and compassion, as well as use the study as an opportunity for self-discovery and growth.

Participant 2 reflected on the nature of transformation and highlighted the value of incremental change:

I think transformation, it’s interesting. So when I first read this question I thought, immediately I thought, “Big.” Like, transformation means something big, and I don’t know that that’s actually true. When I kind of thought about it some more, I think transformation is definitely a mental shift, but I think transformation can be a slight shift. It can be a major shift, but it’s all moving us towards a better version of ourselves.

Participant 2 found that the study helped her to get clear on the reasons why she engages in physical activity:

Through the process, I think it answered the whys for me, in terms of physical activity. I’ve always just done physical activity, but it got me clearer on why I do them. You know, less about the physical, more about probably the mental aspect for me.

Participation in the study had a positive impact because it brought Participant 2 “needed awareness to the topic” and created the opportunity to “really focus on an area of her life that often takes a back seat” (Participant 2). The study became an avenue for small transformation, as she described it, by offering structure and content for regular physical self-care. It also reaffirmed the role that exercise plays in cultivating a positive view of herself as well as offering other benefits on an ongoing basis:
I think the, in the end, the appreciation that I have for this vessel that I walk around in and kind of everything it does for me [has increased]. I’ve also struggled with self-esteem, kind of, body issues over the course of my life, so to get clear on everything my body does for me—instead of looking at it negatively, looking at it positively. The specifics of the positive, I mean, all the things that I’ve been through in my life. . . . I always come back to I had a major car accident, and the fact that I had the strength, physical strength and mental strength, but physical strength to kind of get me out of that and then recover from that. That’s always been a huge one. I think just the miracle that the body is. The longer I live, you know, childbirth, all of those things, just appreciating this amazing vessel we get to move around in. (Participant 2)

Participant 3 is a mother of seven children in her early 50s; family is central in her home. She is very involved with church and considers an active lifestyle important, and as such she enjoys engaging in a variety of activities with her children. Participant 3 learned about the study through an exercise boot-camp instructor. She participates in different types of physical activities and attends group exercise classes regularly. In her prestudy questionnaire she noted that she would most like to improve her expression of personal joy and passion. She came into the study with a sense of curiosity and a willingness to explore whether self-care would impact her life by increasing her confidence and life satisfaction.

Midway through the study, Participant 3 expressed that “it was good to spend time on myself and [realize] that exercising is a part of self-care and not just a chore to accomplish.” The study helped her to reflect on important topics of self-care as well as bring heightened awareness to prioritizing herself. Her transformation was “to become something different” (Participant 3).
She acknowledged that physical movement played a role in that goal by offering an avenue for improvement and a way to monitor that improvement.

Post study, she described reoccurring experiences of having more energy and feeling happier after exercising. However, what she appreciated most about the study was that offered an opportunity to build upon and focus on her sense of accomplishment. As she stated:

I liked the fact that this made me mindful of what I was able to do, and I’d say even though I’ve been exercising for a few years, it just changes your outlook, I guess. I think your mindset has a huge capacity to help you to do, and to improve, and to open your eyes to what you can actually accomplish. (Participant 3)

Participant 4 is a 57-year-old mother of three who is an empty nester; she works full time at the University of Calgary. She enjoys her job and the people she works with. Participant 4 takes pride in doing her job well, but it is not her priority. Her priorities are spending time with family and friends, and taking care of herself physically and emotionally. Participant 4 often works out five to six days a week, which includes two to four days of running, some exercise classes at lunchtime, ski days, hiking, snowshoeing, and biking. She was motivated to participate in the study because she was invited to do so and because she values physical fitness and taking care of herself.

The process of journaling was also a factor for Participant 4 to participate in and finish the study. In her presstudy questionnaire, self-love and compassion were expressed as areas for improvement. She interpreted transformation as “growth” and acknowledged the importance of the body in the process of transformation by being a tool to challenge herself physically. For example, she stated that
running further or running in conditions that are difficult, or like for instance, this weekend I skied double black diamond runs that I’ve not skied before. Out of that came tremendous transformation or growth from challenging myself and pushing myself.

(Participant 4)

For Participant 4, the study reaffirmed how much taking care of herself was important, not only for her personal well-being, but for also being her best self for her family and friends. Self-care highlighted and brought to light the impact physical activity had on her view of commitment, self-confidence, self-compassion, perspective, and achievement.

[I’m] just reading here from Week 4, personal achievement skills. It’s when it asks which statement resonates most with me, and I put [that] I believe in the value of perseverance. That really stands out for me because I do believe in value of perseverance, and I am quite persistent. And I guess just the next sentence to believe in myself all the time. It’s because that’s not something I necessarily do. I don’t always feel that I’m on my game or that I’ve done something as well as I could. So, I think probably like most people, we have times that we’re feeling not so great about things. . . . Having gone through this exercise, it really identifies that that happens, and that’s okay. And that I want to always feel like that. (Participant 4)

Participant 5 is a 31-year-old mother of one. She provides administrative support at a funeral home and teaches yoga at different locations, including an addictions centre, where she is a volunteer. Participant 5 enjoys different activities with her family, which include hiking and walking. She tends to be quite hard on herself, and although she was not facing any difficult life challenges when I approached her with a request to participate, she had experienced trauma in
her childhood. The trauma has impacted her confidence, her view of herself, and her accomplishments both in the past and now.

Past experiences (ages 0–13) put a cap on my confidence and what I have achieved. I tend to downplay my accomplishments, even hide them due to sheer embarrassment of self, for really no evident reason. I have been working through this for the past 12 years.

(Participant 5)

Participant 5 wanted to participate to improve her “sense of self,” primarily her self-confidence and her confidence in the choices she makes. She practices self-care regularly, but she felt that building her sense of empowerment could remove some barriers, and perhaps help her to take more healthy risks to improve her self-confidence. She described transformation as “change” and articulated this change with respect to understanding how the body evolves over time and accepting that evolution. “You’re always gonna look different and feel different at different stages of your life” (Participant 5).

Participant 5 found the 6-week process engaging, enjoyable, and useful, and wanted to keep answering the questions. The study offered an avenue for self-exploration and self-acceptance. As stated earlier, she is quite hard on herself. She acknowledged that she does take things to the “nth degree” and needs to “let myself be” (Participant 5). Having said that, the study’s reflective process and use of self-care to facilitate self-empowerment offered an opportunity for her to view things from a “broader point of view” (Participant 5). It helped her to appreciate what she has done for herself, acknowledge the great strides she has taken, and realize that she does value herself.

I have found that as I slowly understand that these (traumatic) experiences in no way determine my value, I feel empowered to step out of my comfort zone. It is sometimes,
though, a back and forth process. Some days are bad, some days are good. I understand and respect myself for understanding. (Participant 5)

The study also helped Participant 5 to be present to the fact that although she has not always treated her body with care and love, it is something that she is learning to do, and is now doing more consistently. After exercising during the 6-week program, she often felt a reoccurring sense of peace. Participation in the study “did just help extend the awareness of how important self-care is to me, the physical movement and how that works as a therapy for me as an individual, and how that helps me mentally as well” (Participant 5).

In summary, the participants ranged in age from their early 30s to mid-50s. Each was physically active prior to commencing the study and as such had a high level of physical fitness. Four participants were female and one was male. Motivations for participating in the study varied from practicing more self-care and self-compassion to feeling more accomplished and confident. The motivations for participation reflected the diversity of individual learning experiences; however, the commonality among participants was that they were willing to explore what impact physical self-care would have on their self-improvement and sense of self.

The perspective shifts that occurred over the course of the six weeks also reflected the diversity of individual transformation. All the participants came away with new understanding with respect to their self-care and empowerment. This new knowledge varied from rediscovering the importance of prioritizing one’s self-care, to finding a heightened awareness of its impact, creating a more mindful experience, and uncovering new information that left participants feeling more capable, accomplished, and self-aware.
Thematic Analysis

The participants’ transformative learning experiences, leading to their perspective transformations, shared several similarities. In order to understand the process they undertook, I engaged in the following thematic analysis. I took the categories of key words and statements from the questionnaires and interviews that emerged from my analysis and compared them to the subquestions. From this comparison, five themes emerged for the factors that promote or enhance embodied learning: (a) curiosity and a willingness to learn; (b) a structure and process for reflection on thoughts, feelings and emotions, and physical sensations; (c) further reflection and examination of areas of personal improvement and/or achievement; (d) the support received by those around them as well as from themselves; and (e) character strengths.

After identifying the factors that contributed to embodied learning, I then looked more deeply at the role of the body in the transformative learning experience of these participants. In this arena, I identified four qualities or concepts in which the body played a role in the participants’ transformative learning experiences: (a) thoughtfulness, (b) personal acknowledgement, (c) health and wholeness, and (d) affirmation of self. I summarize the findings and characteristics for each of themes, which include quotes from the participants. All themes and concepts that arose from my analysis reflect the individual nuances of personal transformation and respond to the purpose of this study, which was to determine if individuals can experience an empowered sense of self through their bodies and acts of self-care. They also illuminate the role that embodied learning can potentially play in transformative learning. In the following subsections, I provide a detailed account of the thematic analysis with respect to each of the two subquestions I explored in this study.
Theme 1: Curiosity and a willingness to learn. In the first subquestion I asked, “What enhances or promotes embodied learning, which can then help one find an empowered sense of self?” I also asked all the participants what motivated them to participate in the study. As a reminder, embodied learning is a knowing, where thoughts, feelings, emotions, and the meaning of experiences are explored through the instrument of one’s physical body (Amann, 2003; Brendel & Bennett, 2016; Clark, 2001; Dirkx, 2008; Ergas, 2013; Freiler, 2008; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Lawrence, 2012; Lawrence et al., 2013; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Miller-McLemore, 2013; Nguyen & Larson, 2015; Sodhi, 2008; Sodhi & Cohen, 2011). Throughout the recruitment process, many individuals showed interest and excitement at the possibility of participating. Although some of them agreed to begin, they did not actually take part in the study. However, the five participants who ultimately became part of the study started the program and saw the six weeks through. From the analysis of the prestudy assessment, 6-week questionnaire, and interview transcripts, I noted a variety of reasons for initially agreeing to participate. Underlying them all was a willingness to explore how physical engagement, through the body itself and through physical activity, would benefit them in some way.

For example, Participant 3 stated:

I didn’t really know what to expect. [My fitness instructor] laid out a little bit of what it was, but I said, “Oh, yeah, sure. That sounds fun,” and didn’t really think too much about it. So, it was interesting because where I come from, they don’t really think too much about things in terms of how is this benefiting me, or think about it too deeply. They just get on with it. Then as I started to look at the questions, it required a lot more thinking than I had bargained for. I’m a mom; I spend lots of time thinking about my kids and my
family, and you just get on with things. You don’t really think too much about it. So, it was an interesting insight for me. (Participant 3)

As noted in her profile, Participant 2 has always been interested in the link between physical fitness and wellness. She has always looked at things she can do to better her mood and her daily functioning. Participant 2 indicated that one reason for participating was to support my project and me. However, she also participated out of curiosity:

Often we go into things with kind of an end-goal in sight, whereas this was interesting because it allowed me to step back and kind of just put different glasses on, curiosity glasses, and just see what came out of it, which is not typically the way I do things, so that was cool. (Participant 2)

Participant 4 agreed to participate because she was invited to do so but “also because I am interested, . . . because physical fitness and just taking care of myself is important to me.”

Participant 5 shared similar sentiments to Participants 2 and 4 with respect to wanting to support me in my studies and having curiosity about the project. As she stated: “I wanted to help you, and they also seemed interesting to me, the questions that you were proposing” (Participant 5). She, like Participant 2, shared her past challenges and was curious as to how self-care could help her build her sense of empowerment and confidence.

As noted earlier, Participant 1 was willing to try anything to find a way to reconnect with himself and find meaning in his experience of his anxiety and panic attacks. He seemed to be curious as to how physical activity could aid in both.

I’ve always played soccer and hockey and all that kind of stuff, but I’ve never really made it an essential part of life. I would work out, but I never really said, “You know what? I need to do this [for a reason].” . . . I was doing sports because it was something I
was brought into as a kid or whatever, but I never really tied the meaning or a purpose to it as to why I was doing it. (Participant 1)

Regardless of the motivation, there appeared to be a willingness amongst all the participants to explore how physical engagement through their bodies would benefit them in some way. I observed that the theme of curiosity was followed by a theme of reflection, particularly on the process of reflection, as well as on thoughts, feelings, and sensations.

**Theme 2: Reflection.** Cultivating awareness through reflection is integral to transformative learning. Coming to know how and why individuals create meaning and develop beliefs can be the beginning of transformation. The transformative learning experience is a mindful one, whereby the learner makes an informative and reflective decision to act based on his or her insight (Mezirow, 2012). I noticed many similarities in the participants’ experiences during the process of the exploration, which was built into the program design, as well as one account where the type of mindful reflection was unique. Participants were mindful of engaging in the questionnaire and described its use in conjunction with the body as a medium of exploration. I observed that the reflections centred on feelings, emotions, thoughts, and physical sensations. These could be described as core elements of reflection within the study. Another element was the structure of the questionnaire itself, as a guiding tool.

All the participants described using the questionnaire as a positive experience. In general, they found it to be a great reflective tool, which helped to facilitate a deeper level of critical reflection. For example, the use of the questionnaire in conjunction with physical movement was an avenue for Participant 1 to critically reflect and process his thoughts and feelings. At first, he found it tough to process his thoughts and capture ideas. He would have to put down the questionnaire and come back to it later. Once he got to a deeper level of what he was
experiencing, though, ideas and insights started to flow. Participant 1 articulated that the questionnaire itself and the concepts within it were both a structure to follow and a process to guide his reflection. Through its use, he realized he had the ability not only to change his emotional state by being in a different physical state, but also to connect with his emotions on a deeper level:

It just helped me to really kind of better understand how I felt in my body after I did all this. It helped me to really get inside me to what I was feeling, not to kind of push it off and deal with it later. So, it helped me to reflect on what I was gaining from the experience. The concepts really helped to tie everything into the experience. It helped me kind of to break off in a certain element and kind of look at things in a deeper level that I might not have looked at them before. It was almost like a guiding tool. (Participant 1)

Participant 3’s account also highlighted the use of the questionnaire as a reflective guide for self-exploration and depth of experience:

It was good because it helped direct [my thinking]. Often there were things that I just hadn’t really considered before, especially as far as exercise goes and the different areas that it benefited me and added to my life. Like I said, you know, exercise is good for you and I get on with it, and that’s it. I don’t really think too much beyond that, so it was interesting to actually develop some kind of self-awareness, especially the questions that you asked about. If I can remember this correctly now, you asked questions about what we were thinking about as we were exercising and how we related to the exercises, that kind of thing. . . . I don’t even think about stuff like that, so that was a really interesting exercise to go into a class with a mindset and having already looked at those questions and thought about them before I went in. (Participant 3)
As noted in her profile, Participant 2 found that the study and its questions acted as a guide for her to explore her motivations for exercising. Regarding the reflective process, she found that it acted as more of a journey of exploration rather than a driver to a specific outcome. As she stated: “To kind of see over the, not looking at just one week or two weeks of data, but to take it to completion and kind of see the themes that presented themselves over time” (Participant 2).

For Participant 5, the process of using the questionnaire provided many benefits. It provided the stimulation she required to motivate herself to exercise and compelled her to act. In one of her accounts, she described this benefit as what seemed like a dialogue with herself: “‘Hey, remember to do that nice thing for yourself that does lots of wonderful things for your body & mind!’ You don’t say ‘No.’ Right?! That’s nuts” (Participant 5). The questionnaire also acted as an accountability reminder for her to follow through on her participation and as a structure for positive behaviour change:

For my own self, I know that I need that kind of structure. I need step-by-step things, but when you . . . were talking about those habits, . . . you can put a habit in the place of a habit that existed before that maybe you didn’t want, you know. It did encourage me to take time to reflect. (Participant 5)

Participants 2 and 4 gave descriptions of physical injuries they were experiencing during the study, but Participant 4 was the only participant who seemed mindful of, and described, both the physical and environmental conditions in which she was exercising. Participant 4 gave unique, detailed accounts of the world around her, what her body was feeling, and what thoughts she experienced during her workouts over the course of the six weeks. These accounts warrant
noting because they give insight into an area of reflection—physical sensations—that was different from what the other participants described.

For example, Participant 4 stated:

I feel the muscle extensions of my thighs on the bike, the sweat. . . . I noticed the clarity of my new swim goggles and was thrilled. The sun coming through the window was wonderful. I focused on the moment and counted the lengths . . . “Brrr, it’s colder than I thought it would be.” Relief when my fingers warmed up. I feel happy to be enjoying a short, easy run at my favourite time of day (late afternoon). . . . I felt very happy outside.

(Participant 4)

Participant 4 mentioned that she was typically conscious of both the environmental conditions and physical sensations in her body while working out. However, she found that she had not previously written down or reflected on these concepts.

Overall, my analysis found that the questionnaire, in complementary ways for all participants, prompted a deeper level of observation of the world within and around themselves.

**Theme 3: Examination for personal improvement.** From the personal accounts, it was clear that each of the participants was committed to living a purposeful life and to feeling stronger, more confident, and more empowered. Participants were also clear on their motivation for participating and had identified past or current experiences or challenges that they wished to gain new insights on. Each of them appeared willing to look at these experiences and challenges to gain a new perspective. A perspective transformation often occurs either through the transformation of meaning schemes over time (incremental) or as a result of a sudden personal crisis (epochal), such as the death of a loved one, a divorce, a debilitating injury, or a career transition like retirement or job loss (Taylor, 2008). As the participants progressed past their
curiosity and engaged in deeper reflection through the prestudy assessment and 6-week questionnaire, I noticed that they were all reflecting on more than just their thoughts, feelings, and sensations. I noted that they were willing to explore their perspectives on personal challenges and personal outcomes they wanted to improve.

For example, when responding to the question “I embrace adversity and mistakes,” Participant 2 stated, “Adversity, yes. Mistakes I have a harder time with.” As noted in her profile, Participant 2 has had past challenges with self-esteem and body image. As such, she has done a lot of work on worthiness and continues to find opportunities to reinforce valuing herself. She was willing to take a deeper look at her perspectives, be kinder to herself, and “rid myself of perfectionistic thoughts/attitudes around physical imperfections” (Participant 2). Doing so through practicing physical self-care would, she hoped, lead to more self-compassion.

Participant 3 shared a similar sentiment to Participant 2 and articulated that improving self-care and empowerment would impact her life by increasing her confidence and life satisfaction. Participant 3 described how she chooses to live her life: “I live my life trying to be better, and I work hard at it.” She noted that taking time for herself was essential to her well-being and that of her family. The study offered an opportunity for self-reflection and prioritization. The desire for a perspective shift around self-compassion was evident in her response to embracing mistakes and adversity during Week 4 of the study, which focused on sense of self and personal achievement skills. Like Participant 2, she rated this question the lowest of Week 4’s questions and responded by saying, “I beat myself up too much.” Also like Participant 2, the concept of worthiness resonated with Participant 3. In Week 1 of the study, which addressed self-care and prioritizing one’s needs, she resonated most with the statement “I value myself” because she has been working towards embracing this mindset.
The Week 1 statement “I value myself” was the statement that Participant 5 found the most difficult to embrace. Cultivating this attitude has been her biggest project and her most difficult work in progress. As she noted, “It’s a very deep running wound that these questions touch, and so I tend not to value myself as much as I should” (Participant 5). This sentiment carried over into many other weeks:

Feeling deserving of being successful and happy is a tough one for me and something that needs to be watched and at the front of my mind always. Sometimes I forget to watch this, and I tend to fall to old, self-destructive habits. (Participant 5)

Participant 1 wished to reduce his anxiety; explore, learn from, and change his limiting beliefs; and value himself more. He stated that he wanted to move toward more self-care and empowerment: “I need to embrace valuing myself as much as another human being so I can learn to give myself some compassion, forgiveness and kindness to myself” (Participant 1). He also had another unique motivation for participation—a blend of hope and fear:

There were many things in my life that I didn’t accomplish and I didn’t finish because I quit all of them. I just felt like, you know what, this is something I had to finish. . . . Fear of failure, fear of giving up, or I was motivated by maybe, you know what—how about I was motivated by who I thought the person I could become once I finished it. (Participant 1)

Participant 4 was only one who did not seem to judge herself harshly. However, as detailed in the final quote of her profile, she did mention that there are moments when she does not believe in herself, and like others, does not feel her best when she has not done something to her capabilities. It is worthwhile to note that she did not come into the study with a personal crisis as a motivation for participation, although she did experience personal and professional
events that were sudden and significant while participating. All the participants indicated they deserved to be successful and have abundance, but Participants 1 and 5, and to a lesser degree Participants 2 and 3, described struggles with their commitment to building worthiness or valuing themselves. From this analysis I noticed that all the participants described, to varying degrees, some form of self-judgment. This brought the idea of a perspective shift toward self-compassion and valuing oneself to the forefront of my analysis and connected strongly to the next theme, support, and in particular support for oneself.

My data analysis of the examination for personal improvement theme also brought two exploratory questions from early in the study, “I feel grounded and settled” and “I am the master of myself, care and body,” to the forefront. They are important to acknowledge because they relate to the theme of personal improvement by either moving towards an outcome or working on a personal challenge. The first of the exploratory questions, one of the guiding questions in Week 1’s focus of self-care, was, “I feel grounded and settled.” All but one of the participants, Participant 4, indicated that being grounded and settled was important, and that they were seeking or would like to improve this outcome in their lives. Participant 1 found it difficult to feel grounded and settled because he did not ever feel truly happy; he did not know what happiness was or how to attain it. Participant 3 also found the statement “I feel grounded and settled” difficult to embrace because her levels of stress and anxiety often prevented her from feeling this way.

The question regarding feeling grounded and settled resonated most with Participants 2 and 5 for different, almost opposing, reasons. Participant 2 stated that she is feeling closer to attaining this goal than ever before. Participant 5, however, responded on the other side of the spectrum:
I have always tended to be flighty. Practicing things that help ground me is extremely important to me right now. It’s at the forefront of my mind because I know I tend to have my head stuck in the clouds, and I like it there—it’s comfortable for me. I am very conscious of it.

Another exploratory statement in Week 1 of the study was, “I am the master of myself, care and body.” Four of five participants responded to this question. Participant 4 stated, “I am the master of myself because no one else is and nor should they be. I accept full responsibility for my care and body.” Participant 2 felt that in the past, she had not been in control of her health. However, she now believed that her health was mostly within her control. For Participant 1, being his own master represented self-love and acceptance of the whole self. For Participant 5, this statement resonated because it was something new and impactful in her life:

I only discovered the meaning of this statement in adulthood, so I am fully exercising this newfound power. It is still relatively new for me, so it feels like my new sweatpants that I keep washing so I can wear them again because they are so damn comfortable.

I surmised that feeling grounded and settled, and embracing personal mastery, reflected the overarching theme of examining areas for personal growth and improvement. I interpreted these sentiments as meaning that the participants who were seeking stability, and perhaps personal mastery, could eventually point to personal transformation. Feeling grounded and settled, and mastering oneself, resonated and connected with the next two themes: support and character strengths. In other words, cultivating capability and self-compassion may be encouraged through building support, internally and externally. In addition, character strengths like commitment and perseverance in these participants may have also contributed to the possibility of personal transformation.
Theme 4: Support. As noted earlier, Participant 4 was the only participant to describe the environmental conditions around her physical activity as well as the physical sensations in her body during exercise in detail. Regarding the physical requirements of exercise, the participants’ physical activity, and familiarity and comfort with the types of exercise that they chose to engage in, may have reduced some barriers to learning. Bearing these considerations in mind, I noticed that neither the environmental conditions nor the type of physical activity was significant for the participants’ learning experiences. On the other hand, I found that the social conditions around them were important with respect to their beliefs and ability to engage in acts of self-care and personal transformation. Four of the five participants described feeling very supported with respect to their self-care. Yet in the face of this strong support, many of the participants still had challenges supporting themselves or asking for support, which was highlighted in my earlier observation that the participants seemed to judge themselves harshly.

Participant 2 felt that she was surrounded by supportive and empathetic people: “I have so many people in my life that love and care for me.” In response to the questions regarding fear of disappointing others and feeling guilty putting her needs first, Participant 2 answered “not at all.” She has worked hard at her self-expression, believes she is heard, and values her voice and opinion. She is well supported, is self-expressed, and appears to have a healthy relationship regarding the opinions of others and prioritizing herself. Even so, she still finds it difficult to ask for support. She stated that embracing vulnerability would allow her to ask for and receive more support for herself. Participant 2 also indicated that she is very hard on herself, often does not support herself enough, and has a tendency to do things on her own.

Participant 3’s account of support was similar to Participant 2’s. Participant 3 found it easiest to embrace feeling supported by others: “It’s important to one’s well-being and sense of
belonging.” The fear of disappointing others was the statement she found most difficult to embrace, stating, “No one enjoys that feeling” (Participant 3). She also found it difficult to embrace Week 5’s statement around opening up, for fear of being hurt. Participant 3 felt she needed to embrace letting go of fear in general, and the fear of being hurt in particular. Being compassionate is something that comes naturally to her, and she stated that as she thought about compassion, forgiveness, and love of self while working out, her outlook became more positive.

Consistent with the other participants, Participant 4 found it easy to embrace feeling supported by others. She expressed a commitment to community by stating, “You can always support and encourage others more” (Participant 4). She also expressed a strong sense of supporting herself based on her belief of personal accountability.

Participant 5 felt very supported by her family and friends—people who understand her and with whom she feels safe. Without this support, she could not get to the gym, go on long walks, or volunteer at the addiction centre. All these activities are important to her and bring her joy. However, Participant 5 does not feel safe with herself, at times, because of cynicism. She finds it difficult to open up and let others in. Building trust and breaking down walls are areas she noted she could develop to feel more joy, passion, and empowerment in her life.

In Week 6 of the study, which focused on communicating personal needs and self-expression, Participant 5 indicated that she felt guilty putting her needs first, depending on the circumstances:

I ask for support when I need it—sometimes too early, sometimes a little too late, but I ask. Asking for support shouldn’t feel shameful; asking for support is humbling. I am happy I can embrace this. When I am humbled I feel empowered because I learned
something new, or I felt compassion/love by the actions of another. Asking for help and support can feel empowering, which is funny, I guess.

Participant 1 was the only participant to describe not having good support around him. In fact, he believed people do not understand him, and as a result, he has held back on his authentic self. He also believed that expressing himself was a sign of weakness, and consequently he would “bottle himself up.” This tendency has impacted his ability to show vulnerability with others and to ask for support. He indicated that it was most difficult to embrace asking for support because that would require communicating his vulnerabilities to others, which in turn would require them to accept, as Participant 1 described, his “true self.”

Participant 1 felt an internal conflict in expressing himself. He values his own opinion but is fearful of using his voice to support how feels. He sought to improve his self-acceptance “no matter what” (Participant 1). Much of his focus has been on supporting himself. He acknowledged that embracing his feelings is an area for growth and opportunity, and as the study progressed, he stated that he was feeling more vulnerable, which was allowing him to feel more.

The thematic analysis yielded a deeper understanding of the support conditions for embodied learning to occur and identified what internal and external social conditions enhanced participants’ embodied and transformative learning experiences. My analysis pointed towards external social support as being important to the participants’ practice of self-care and learning. This was the case whether the social support was already well established and allowed the participants to engage in activities freely, or, as in the case for Participant 1, was lacking and desired. Even though the majority of the participants had external situations that supported their learning and growth, the results suggest that more work needs to be done in creating an internal environment where individuals can not only learn and grow, but ask for the support needed to do
so, particularly from themselves. I found that as the participants displayed more of the next theme, character strengths, they seemed less critical of themselves and more engaged in their acts of self-care, which in turn promoted more learning through engaging with their bodies.

**Theme 5: Character strengths.** Consistent among the participants was an acknowledgement that when they start something or make a commitment, they finish it. From my communication with them, I was left thinking that they had high degrees of integrity towards honouring an agreement, as well as strong value systems guiding their motivations, within which perseverance was noticeable. For example, when I asked Participant 3 what motivated her to finish the study, she responded, “I had committed to do it.” When I then asked if commitment was important to her, she said, “Yes. I said I would do it, so therefore, I had to do it.”

Participant 4 articulated a similar level of commitment and dedication. When she was asked what motivated her to finish the study, she stated, “It’s kind of how I am. If I start something, I’m gonna finish it” (Participant 4). Participant 2 also showed the same level of dedication, stating, “I would say primarily when I start things, I finish them.”

Commitment and dedication took the form of perseverance with respect to enduring physical injuries, pain, and the intensity of exercise. Participants 2 and 4 provided detailed accounts of the physical injuries, sensations of pain, and challenges they experienced during their physical activity throughout the study. Participant 2 went for a run and commented, “Running is hard, but I’m getting better. My body is strong.” The next day, she engaged in a gym workout. She indicated her shoulder was painful and some self-talk was necessary: “Be kind to yourself; have patience” (Participant 2). On another run, she found it difficult to establish a joyful mindset working through weights and rehabilitation. The connection between her physical injuries and her mindset and perseverance could further be seen when she indicated that she was performing
less rehabilitation work with weights: “It was easier to feel better about my body when I am not injured” (Participant 2). Through her injury rehabilitation, she expressed another important value to overcoming challenges and practicing self-care: resilience. Her practice of self-care and injury rehabilitation led to the realization that “resilience was key to the process” (Participant 2).

As I delved into the underlying motivation for participation, bearing in mind a possible desire for feeling stable and masterful, more of the participants’ value systems became apparent. Participant 4 expressed similar sentiments to Participant 2, giving me further insight into the theme of the motivation for participation. Participant 4 mentioned that persistence is her strongest characteristic; as such, she believes in and values perseverance. She described having strength of character, embracing adversity, and making the best of a physical injury to be important attributes. For example, during a challenging run with a pace that was the fastest she had done in three years, her dialogue was, “Work, you can do it, this is hard, oh my God, yes, you can do it, look how strong you are, almost done, almost there” (Participant 4). In two runs later in the week, she noted different aches and pains, particularly in the knee, which she referred to at different times during the study. Participant 3 highlighted the value of persistence and perseverance with three simple words, “keep moving forward,” during two exercise sessions mid-study.

Another indicator of the participants’ character strengths was the willingness to look at one’s strengths and challenges. Engaging in a process of self-reflection, self-discovery, and transformation requires, in my opinion, courage and authenticity. All the participants were willing not only to explore old ideas, beliefs, and patterns, but also to express and share them. I structured the study questionnaire to allow participants to acknowledge their strengths and reflect on challenging areas of their lives and self-perceived limitations. From their profiles and
personal accounts within the theme of motivation, I noticed different levels of vulnerability. This finding may reflect where individuals were on their personal journey at the time of the study. At no time did I get a sense that participants were holding back or being inauthentic in their responses.

In summary, from my thematic analysis I found five themes that were part of the embodied learning experience: a curiosity and willingness to learn, reflection, examination for personal improvement, support, and character strengths. The results point towards the notion that the body plays a role in learning, which is discussed in detail in the following section.

The role of the body in the transformative learning experience. For the second subquestion, I asked, “What role does the human body serve in transformational learning?” My analysis supports the idea that the body, for the participants in my study, serves as a medium for self-exploration, self-expression, and self-discovery. As noted earlier, I found that the participants’ use of the questionnaire for motivation, support, exploration, and reflection provided the conditions, structure, and content for learning and transformation to occur. The body, and the care of it, acted as the tool. The participants’ descriptions and accounts support the idea that these elements worked together to create an embodied learning experience, whereby the participants gained new knowledge, shifted perspectives, and moved towards a more empowered sense of themselves. Based on my analysis, this empowered sense of self can be broken down further into four qualities or concepts: thoughtfulness, personal acknowledgement, health and wholeness, and affirming oneself.

Thoughtfulness. The participants displayed increased critical reflection and self-awareness, as noted earlier in the themes of reflection, examination for personal improvement, and support. I noticed that participants were more attuned to their thoughts, feelings, body, and
needs. They all contemplated the concept of physical self-care and its impact on their empowerment. In essence, participants reflected on what could be missing in their lives, how their experiences have been life impacting, what they have made these experiences mean, and ultimately how they could utilize the body as a way to change their view and experience of themselves. In short, it seemed that each participant became a more thoughtful person by being more conscious of, and attending to, physical well-being; each learned something new about the sense of well-being through his or her body.

As I thought about and explored the quality of thoughtfulness further, I came to believe that it is the foundational quality and concept, upon which the other three (personal acknowledgement, health and wholeness, and affirming oneself) are built upon. Through this lens, I saw the specifics of this thoughtfulness. Each quality then evolves from, or builds upon, the previous quality. Even though all four are clear concepts, I found it difficult interpret them as separate or distinct from one another. There appeared to be a strong interconnection amongst them, much like the statements from each of the participants, which were often representative of more than one quality at a time.

**Personal acknowledgement.** As the participants became more thoughtful of their needs, I noticed that they expressed a greater awareness and prioritization of their own self-care, became more self-expressed, or became more encouraging of themselves. These findings came in the form of definitive statements in which the participants not only committed to prioritizing their self-care and sense of self, but did so in a way that developed into an acknowledgement of both the positive and negative sense of oneself, which participants brought to the forefront and embraced.
In my study, the guiding question for Week 2 asked participants to consider support, either by oneself or from others. While playing hockey, Participant 1 reflected on this concept and told himself, “I am proud of myself despite the outcome. I’m always ready for any challenge I may face as I will be there to support myself.”

Participant 5 was mindful of the need to provide herself love and safety, and she drew motivation from that awareness. During Week 3 of the program, with a focus on expression of joy and passion, she expressed that she tends not to fully enjoy herself, show pride in her accomplishments, or feel deserving of experiencing joy. Through physical movement, she gains access to these values and is “able to explore what I am or [what I] want to be more passionate about me” (Participant 5). During Week 5, I noticed a shift in perspective when she responded to the question “I love and honour myself”; I interpreted this shift to be indicative of thoughtfulness and personal acceptance:

I feel better about this statement as of late. I guess it is due to all the work I put into myself. I honour myself by abiding by the foundations taught to me by my teacher, the values passed on to me by my mother, and applying the wisdom I gain through self-experience. Loving and honouring yourself can be expressed in every part of your life. I like this. (Participant 5)

Throughout my analysis, I found that Participant 3 would often state ideas succinctly but rich in detail. Early in the study, she expressed her acknowledged self when she came to the realization that “exercise is my time to take care of me” (Participant 3).

Both Participant 2 and Participant 4 acknowledged the importance of taking care of their needs, not just for themselves, but also for others. Participant 2 has made self-care a priority in her life, and expressed, “I can’t help others without helping myself first.” For Participant 4, the
study reaffirmed that the body and self-care are tools for feeling better and being her best self—for herself, her family, and her friends.

I found that the results from my analysis of personal acknowledgement support the idea that one possible role for the body is to provide a medium for the practice of self-care. I found that through the body, the participants could reflect on how they were treating themselves, and then subsequently reflect on, and practice, acknowledgement of oneself. I surmise that this could lead to the participants feeling better about themselves not just physically and emotionally, but also mentally and spiritually. From personal acknowledgement came the next quality: health and wholeness.

**Health and wholeness.** This aspect of self encompassed better mental, emotional, and spiritual health. What emerges from the voices of my participants was that negative emotions, feelings, or states—physical or otherwise—could be explored and shifted to more positive ones by engaging with and through the body. It appeared that the experience of health and wholeness became more than just a physical shift. All the participants also alluded to, or explicitly expressed, a mental and/or emotional benefit; in some cases, participants described the experience as spiritual. The results support the idea that the body for these participants plays a role in a holistic approach to well-being and attention to oneself.

As noted earlier, Participant 1 found a strong connection to his emotions in the study and learned that they matter. The use of the questionnaire in conjunction with physical movement was a roadmap for him to critically reflect on and process his thoughts and feelings. This, in turn, led to a spiritual experience for him:

So, for me, it was just tying in the whole process of the experience and emotional state of my body. I felt more connected. It gave me a sense of value in my life spiritually. It just
brought so much value to me spiritually that I could change my emotion levels just by being in a different physical state. I’d say the experience of the study was . . . very holistical. So, it allowed me to look at basically how everything is all tied in. (Participant 1)

The deep reflection Participant 5 experienced in the study was also spiritual in nature, which was influenced by her yoga practice:

My yoga teacher, she always encouraged us to look into our own selves first, and leaving the physical benefits of the movement when it came to yoga and the strengthening movements, the benefits of that would come afterwards, but she always encouraged us to focus first on those basic values that that practice is based upon, and that everything else would come afterwards. (Participant 5)

Participant 4 described the study as a good reflective experience for contemplating the interconnection between how her body felt physically and how she thought about her body and her performance. Following physical exercise, she would experience feelings of peace and put worries into perspective.

Participant 3 also described the study as a good reflective experience, one that enabled her to contemplate the connections between body, exercise, and empowerment. It affirmed that physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being are connected. Adding awareness during exercise helped Participant 3 have a more balanced view of herself and what she was doing.

Because we were being asked to be more mindful, for me it was interesting to see the difference between just doing it normally and having that purposeful, positive thought process going through my mind as I was doing it. It just adds to what exercise can do for you mentally and emotionally, I think, just because I don’t usually consider those things
or think about it too much, but it just ended up being a more enjoyable experience. [The study] just increased my gratitude and appreciation for what I’m able to do and what my body can do. (Participant 3)

Participant 2 echoed the other participants’ sentiments in that the role of exercise and the body offered more than just physical wellness. For her, this realization was not evident week to week, but rather observed and discovered over time:

I did see, not kind of differences from week to week, but definitely a theme around the fact that physical activity was helping me, not only with mental and physical wellness, but getting clear on the reasons why I engage in physical activity. (Participant 2)

As stated earlier, the process of analyzing the role of the body in transformational learning led me to identify four interconnected qualities, which highlights and further supports the interconnectivity within the learning and transformational experience. The last quality in the evolution was participants’ acknowledgement of their abilities and strengths.

**Affirmation of self.** In this final quality, the participants reaffirmed themselves as, or discovered themselves to be, capable, confident, and resilient human beings. The design of the study was such that the participants could have greater control over how they experienced and interpreted their six weeks of physical self-care. They could delve into their strengths and weaknesses on their own terms to have an authentic and safe conversation with themselves to see who they are and who they wanted to be.

Participant 4 described physical movement as a source of “power and motivation.” Throughout my analysis, I found statements from her that confirmed this sentiment. Physical movement was a method to acknowledge that she “embraces adversity” and is “very persistent” (Participant 4). One statement in particular summed up the role of the body and physical activity
with respect to her sense of self and also reinforced the connection to her healthy and whole self. As she stated, “In order to feel capable, I feel like I need to be physical fit and on my game, which directly impacts how I feel emotionally and mentally” (Participant 4).

Participant 3 found her body to be a source of empowerment. She found that exercise helped her to feel accomplished and to “combat fear and other negative feelings” (Participant 3). She described the study as a good reflective experience because it helped in contemplating the connections between her body, her physical activity, and her sense of herself:

“I tried to keep it somewhere where it was at the forefront of my mind, so that I would remember it. Usually I would pick up the same weights or whatever or kind of be, I don’t know. I just found that I could push myself more and get more out of it and feel a bit more accomplished.” (Participant 3)

One of Participant 3’s goals for participation was to feel more confident. From her accounts, I interpreted that feeling more accomplished through physical activity helped her to achieve this goal.

Participants 1 and 2 expressed a connection to resilience in the study. For Participant 1, this affirmation of resilience suggested a shift in perspective around his limiting beliefs and an acknowledgement of his character. As he stated, “I am resilient because I have had many conflicting beliefs about myself and the world around me, but I always had some strength that kept pushing me forward” (Participant 1). Participant 2 mentioned resilience in terms of rehabilitating from injuries and overcoming the many challenges she has faced with respect to self-image. She stated:
I learned that I’m resilient. I mean, I think I knew that, so it maybe confirmed it rather than learning it. But mostly, I think (I learned), just the positive role that exercise, or movement, plays in my life in an ongoing basis. (Participant 2)

Like Participants 1 and 2, Participant 5 described herself as resilient, and like Participant 1, she connected with her character strengths during the study:

Physical movement has a lot to do with my self-expression. I did think on the statement and found it still opened my eyes to a part of myself I have failed to recognize. The reasons why are beyond me now; I am unable to manipulate what has already caused a deep impression on my person. I am, however, deeply focused on HOW am I expressing myself physically. Is it in a way that runs parallel with my deeply rooted virtues, morals, and cultural practices, as opposed to self-destructive or self-abusive tendencies? This is what my primary focus is, being a person who has suffered severe physical traumas. In my personal experience, focusing on mental discipline combined with physical expression through yoga, exercise, and dance is an effective way to heal, moderate, and uplift self-destructive or self-abusive habits extending from PTSD and the traumas that had caused it. (Participant 5)

The results of the thematic analysis support the finding that engaging with their bodies in meaningful and thoughtful ways helped the participants to find a more empowered view of themselves. As the participants moved through the program, I interpreted the result as an empowered transformation, which can be seen throughout the five themes, the four qualities, and within each participant’s profile. These shifts in perspective appeared to be both incremental and epochal, depending on the participant and where he or she was situated on the journey of transformation. Even though all the participants described the overall experience, and the
subsequent perspective shifts, as positive, the results also support the evolution of the empowered self as dynamic, with individuals experiencing ups and downs, positive and negative, throughout their personal journeys of transformation.

The thematic analysis also yielded a deeper understanding of the role embodied learning plays within the world of transformative learning, as seen through the experiences of the participants in my study. The themes within the participants’ individual journeys of self-care reflect three overarching themes within Mezirow’s (2012) theory of transformative learning: a disorienting dilemma, critical reflection, and discourse, with the discourse in this study appearing more holistic and embodied rather than strictly rational, all of which I discuss in further detail in the next chapter.

**Summary**

In this chapter I presented the findings from my analysis of the participants’ 6-week journey of physical self-care. I selected quotes from each of the participants that were reflective of their voices and experience. These quotes reflect the themes of my findings and illustrate my interpretation of the description of their experience.

The findings revealed five themes for the first subquestion: curiosity and a willingness to learn, reflection, examination for personal improvement, support, and character strengths. The analysis also supported my past experience and personal observations as a coach and trainer that the body plays a role in promoting transformative learning and an empowered sense of self. This was displayed through four qualities or concepts found from the analysis of the second subquestion: thoughtfulness, personal acknowledgement, health and wholeness, and the affirmation of oneself. I provided individual accounts of the participants’ experiences and lessons learned using quotes and statements that express the four selves as a unified whole.
In the final chapter, Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion, I begin with a discussion based on the findings and thematic analysis that emerged from this study, add my observations of the study, and conclude with implications and future considerations for research and practice.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

In this final chapter I provide a brief overview of the aim of transformative learning and the purpose of this study. I also provide an overview of the findings and my observations. A discussion on the implications for practice, study limitations, and considerations for future research conclude the chapter.

Observations

“There is an instinctive drive among all humans to make meaning of their daily lives” (Taylor, 2008, p. 5). Transformative learning theory is the process by which individuals come to understand how they think and act. Through it individuals reflect on life experiences, explore the meaning of their experiences, and revise them to improve decisions and guide future action for meaningful change (Hoggan, 2016; Hoggan et al., 2017; Illeris, 2014; Taylor, 2008; Taylor & Laros, 2014). The purpose of this thesis was to explore the role of embodied learning within transformative learning; more specifically, I wanted to discover what role physical activity and self-care serve in discovering and creating an empowered sense of self.

The findings suggest that overall, the study was not only a positive experience for the participants, but self-care and the body served a role in promoting their embodied learning, holistic well-being, and an empowered sense of self. I found that the participants reinforced, or came away with, positive perceptions of themselves, new knowledge, better mental and emotional health, and increased feelings of accomplishment and confidence. These general findings are consistent with research regarding physical activity and self-esteem, mental and emotional health, and self-efficacy, which is an individual’s belief in his or her ability to be successful in different situations by influencing thoughts, actions, choices, and goal setting.
(Bandura, 2006; Boyer, Edmondson, Artis, & Fleming, 2014; Swan & Hyland, 2012; Tamura, 2014; Zamani Sani et al., 2016).

My analysis of, and findings from, the two subquestions of the thesis revealed several interesting observations and connections to current research and transformative learning that warrant further discussion and exploration. I present my observations from the analysis of the subquestions and their connection to transformative learning, in the following sections.

**Disorienting dilemmas.** In the first question I asked, “What enhances or promotes embodied learning, which can then help one find an empowered sense of self?” As the foundation of their learning experience, all the participants expressed and displayed a curiosity and willingness to learn. They were curious as to how physical engagement might be a further benefit to the intentions they wanted to work towards. They were also committed to identifying past or current challenges that they wished to gain new insights and perspectives on. A perspective transformation often occurs either through the transformation of meaning schemes over time (incremental) or as a result of a sudden personal crisis (epochal) that evoke a specific reaction and response to the event (Laros, 2017; Taylor, 2008). These challenges, which in the transformative learning world are called disorienting dilemmas, can cause individuals to question the meaning of their lives and their life experiences (Mezirow, 2012; Taylor, 2008).

Nohl (2015) stated that the transformative learning process begins with a “nondetermining start” (p. 39), when novelty that is neither anticipated nor planned presents itself into a person’s life; this factor brings about the readiness for change. As such, the transformative learning process can start with the integration of new practices into existing ones without a crisis being involved (Laros, 2017; Nohl, 2015). Laros (2017) stated that research on the catalysts of transformative learning experiences illustrates that the complexity surrounding
disorienting dilemmas exceeds the scope of Mezirow’s (2012) conception of the theory. I found that both the nondetermining starts and disorienting dilemmas were present in my study; however, my findings seemed to be more consistent with Nohl’s concept of nondetermining start.

Participant 1 displayed what could be described as a true disorienting dilemma. He was feeling the impact of his anxiety attacks in the present and was searching for meaning in the experiences. He was also questioning the alignment of his beliefs and actions with respect to personal fulfillment and achievement. The other four participants did not appear in to be in crisis and were more reflective of what could be considered nondetermining starts.

While, participants 2 and 3 described their past challenges (body image, depression, and self-esteem for Participant 2, and self-esteem and childhood trauma for Participant 3), neither appeared to be in crisis. Rather, they were present to the impact of their past challenges and seemed to be curious about integrating the practices of my study into their current health and wellness regime. I interpreted this finding as past disorienting dilemmas blended with nondetermining starts. Participants 4 and 5 were at the other end of the continuum with what appeared to be simply a willingness to look at new health practices to complement their current routines.

My results appear to support both Laros’ (2017) and Nohl’s (2015) positions on disorienting dilemmas, in that the view of disorienting dilemmas, and the events that lead up to them, needs to be expanded. Mezirow’s (2012) conception of transformative learning does not cover the nuances of human experience in this regard.

As I delved further into the participants’ motivations for participation (for example, challenges they wished to overcome or achievements they wanted to fulfill), each appeared to
weigh different factors—time for family, time for self, time for work, awareness of past challenges, deliberation of future intentions. With all these considerations in mind, they were still motivated enough to see the six weeks through to completion, whereas others either dropped out or never began. As Participant 3 stated, the study sounded like fun. She was aware that she typically did not give much thought to her exercise experiences. Participants 2 and 5 articulated a little more curiosity regarding the process of self-exploration at the beginning of the study. Participant 4 was clear on the benefits exercise has provided her and was willing to look at this impact on her life more deeply. Finally, Participant 5’s motivation for participation was a search for meaning.

It appears that these decisions to participate were influenced, to varying degrees, by what I would describe as an intuitive choice working at a less than conscious level. Underneath the curiosity and willingness to learn, and events leading up to the decision to participate, there may have been a process working at a deeper level than consciousness alone. This finding shows some similarities to Nohl’s (2015) findings; the interviewees in his study appeared to be searching consciously or unconsciously for something of meaning in their lives, looking for an additional or missing piece, so to speak, which then initiates the transformative learning process. Additionally, Mälkki (2012) who studied involuntary childlessness, suggested that “assumptions becoming problematic” (p. 219) are not the trigger for reflection. Rather, the disorienting dilemma is experienced through unpleasant feelings, making disorienting dilemmas inherently emotional experiences. She also stated that this finding did not negate the role of critical reflection; instead, reflection complemented and supported working through the emotional experience of involuntary childlessness (Mälkki, 2012).
Although only Participant 1 appeared to be displaying intense feelings at the start of the study, it appeared to me that feelings, whether curiosity or something more, were involved in all participants’ decisions to participate. I interpreted that these feelings were somehow connected to the desired result of participation, which could have been how self-care would benefit them in some way. My findings may point to a decision-making process that is a blend of conscious, unconscious, and emotional factors, warranting further discussion and exploration as to the role of embodied learning in the factors that lead up to disorienting dilemmas and the transformative learning process. This finding also appears to apply to the process of reflection.

**Reflection.** All the participants went through a process of reflection on their thoughts, feelings, and emotions, and described the 6-week questionnaire as a great reflective tool. The use of the questionnaire in conjunction with physical acts of self-care appeared to facilitate a deeper level of reflection, more than may have been achieved through critical reflection alone. As Participant 5 stated, indicative of the overall experience for all the participants, “I don’t usually ask myself these questions [from the questionnaire]—or at least, not often enough. They’re simple, but can be deep, if you think about them long enough.”

Similarly, I found that the following statement from Participant 1 encapsulated all five participants’ experience:

So, a lot of the times I would do things and then, I would just go about my life. And maybe what would happen is somewhere down the road, I couldn’t remember how I really felt about it. So, what happened is it [the study] allowed me to reflect on how I was feeling. It allowed me to reflect on where my emotional state was, how my body felt. It helped me to reflect on how I felt spiritually, with how connected I felt to this moment in
particular. You know, how the experience made me feel. It helped me to feel . . . more connected.

This finding is consistent with research conducted by Rigg (2017), on Buddhist practices of mindfulness meditation, and Khoury et al. (2017), who illustrated how embodied mindfulness can facilitate a learning process that connects bodily sensation with thought, reflection, and awareness. Rigg stated, “The Buddhist understanding of ‘mind’ is integrative of physical consciousness, such that physical sensory information is both physical data about the body itself, and potentially a window into unacknowledged emotion” (2017, p. 2). She then claimed this Buddhist perspective on mindfulness offers critical reflection the benefit of not just learning to slow down and relax, but also to become aware of one’s habits of thought, unrecognized assumptions, and unconscious reactions. In essence, it is important for individuals to learn to be aware of and attentive to what they are sensing, feeling, noticing, and experiencing in the moment.

The thematic analysis showed the role that curiosity, feelings, and reflection play in promoting embodied learning. It also yielded a deeper understanding of how support, self-compassion, and character strengths are integral to enhancing the conditions for embodied learning to occur. I found each of these concept and themes to have a strong connection to mindful reflection.

Research by Reblin and Uchino (2008) found that social and emotional support from others can be protective for health. Cené et al. (2013) found that perceived emotional and social support is associated with better self-care maintenance and possibly better self-care management in heart failure patients. It is often assumed that social support positively predicts health, but J. Park et al. (2012) found the empirical evidence has been inconsistent. My results were more
consistent with Cené et al. (2013) in that four of the five participants in the current study felt socially supported and displayed consistent self-care behaviours. However, what was of interest to me was the lack of self-support and self-compassion the participants offered to themselves. All the participants, to varying degrees, articulated some self-criticism. Improving self-care and self-compassion was a consistent theme amongst the participants, with only Participant 4 not articulating the same degree of challenges with these issues.

Mills, Wand, and Fraser (2015) found that within the nursing environment there is a need for more self-compassion and self-care. Although the authors stated that self-care is vital and benefits both nurses and patients, its practice was neglected. This neglect may be due to the general societal stigma that acts of self-care are considered selfish, and to the fact that any emphasis on self per se would be perceived to take away from the care of others (Mills et al., 2015). All the participants in my study had children and other competing priorities. The participants who found it a challenge to prioritize self-care and self-compassion may have found it difficult for the same reasons as the nurses. This conclusion is speculative on my part but warrants discussion, and further research into the factors that prevent prioritizing self-care would be beneficial.

One important note was that a structured format seemed to aid the participants in prioritizing their self-care. As the participants in my study were more mindfully reflective, being directed to focus on acts of physical self-care through the questionnaire, they seemed less critical of themselves and more engaged in their acts of self-care, which in turn promoted more learning through engaging with their bodies. This finding is consistent with a pilot study by Neff and Germer (2013), who evaluated the effectiveness of a mindful self-care (MSC) program over the course of 8 weeks. The program was designed to train people to be more self-compassionate.
Participants were given the 26-item Self-Compassion Scale, which assesses the positive and negative aspects of the three main components of self-compassion: self-kindness vs. self-judgment (showing self-understanding vs. disapproval), common humanity vs. isolation (seeing one as part of humanity vs. seeing one as alone during challenges), and mindfulness vs. over-identification (taking a balanced view to a situation vs. obsessing and fixating on what is wrong). They found that the MSC program appeared to be effective at enhancing self-compassion, mindfulness, and well-being (Neff & Germer, 2013).

As noted in Chapter 4, as the participants displayed more of their character strengths, they seemed less critical of themselves and more engaged in their acts of self-care, in turn practicing more self-compassion. This outcome may be attributable in part to a structure and process that guided the participants to be more mindful of their physical activity in the moment and connect that mindfulness with characteristics they wished to improve and/or attend to. The connection between mindfulness and character strengths, well-being, and life satisfaction is growing within the research.

Character strengths have been consistently related to life satisfaction (N. Park & Peterson, 2009). For example, Martínez-Martí and Ruch (2014) examined the relationship between character strengths and well-being and found that in general, hope, zest, and humour consistently yielded the highest correlations with well-being. Four of the five participants in my study rated their levels of satisfaction higher after participating than before. Participant 4 was the only one whose ratings stayed the same; however, she did note that the personal and professional crises that occurred while she was participating contributed to that lack of improvement. She also noted that the commitment to taking care of her physical, mental, and emotional well-being helped her through those challenging times.
Niemiec, Rashid, and Spinella (2012) discussed the conceptual overlap between mindfulness practices and character strengths, and suggested that the integration of mindfulness and character strengths offers individuals several benefits:

- a way to confront, manage, or overcome obstacles that naturally emerge during mindfulness practices (e.g., mind wandering, painful body sensations);
- concrete tools to widen perspective and deepen practice by employing particular strengths (e.g., perseverance);
- a language to capture positive states and traits that can often be outcomes of mindfulness; and
- a way to facilitate increased self-awareness and potential for change by bringing one’s character strengths more clearly into view. (p. 241)

When comparing the structure and results of my study with the benefits and outcomes just presented, there is a strong connection between the embodied process offered in my study and drawing out character strengths. These findings suggest the importance of embodied learning not only in reflection but in discourse.

**Discourse.** The second subquestion of my study was, “What role does the human body serve in transformational learning?” My results suggest that the participants’ use of both their body and the questionnaire facilitated not just a process of reflection but also a dialogue with themselves that was more than rational. As the participants went further into their reflection through their bodies and 6-week questionnaire, they appeared to be more thoughtful, self-acknowledged, and mentally, emotionally, and physically healthier. Additionally, in the cases of Participants 1 and 5, they were more spiritually healthy, more affirmed, and more empowered.
Khoury et al. (2017) considered consciousness as an interaction between the mind, the body, and the outside world. Physiologically, the integration of conceptual processes with sensory awareness takes place in the middle prefrontal cortex, a region of the brain that connects the body itself to the brainstem, limbic area, cortex, and environmental input, including other people (Khoury et al., 2017). The middle prefrontal cortex is related to increased body regulation, internal and interpersonal attunements, emotional regulation, flexibility, insight, kindness, and compassion, which corresponds with what has been found among outcomes of both traditional Buddhist and Western mindfulness meditation approaches (Khoury et al., 2017). Khoury et al.’s research suggested that meditation practices, based on either Buddhist or Western mindfulness, increased practitioners’ awareness of the interaction of body states with cognitive and emotional processes.

N. Park and Peterson (2009) acknowledged that research has consistently shown that character strengths of the “heart” (e.g., love, gratitude), that connect people, are more strongly associated with well-being than strengths of the “head” (e.g., creativity, critical thinking, excellence), which seem more individual. Research has not discounted the benefits of character strengths of the head, but it has highlighted the importance—and power—of heart-based strengths on increased wellness. As noted earlier in the chapter, my general findings were consistent with research regarding physical activity and self-esteem, mental and emotional health, and self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006; Boyer et al., 2014; Swan & Hyland, 2012; Tamura, 2014; Zamani Sani et al., 2016). Also consistent with the research of Khoury et al. (2017), N. Park and Peterson (2009), Neff and Germer (2013), and Niemiec et al. (2012), the 6-week questionnaire and use of the body in my study facilitated a process of discourse that suggested a holistic rather than a strictly rational process, where physiological, psychological, and perceptual
elements may have worked in concert with one another. These findings, and the previous findings on disorienting dilemmas, reflection, and the embodied process used in my study, have implications for practice and future research.

**Implications for Practice**

There are different considerations for different audiences based on my findings and observations in this research. These implications for practice, and in particular for transformative learning, also have relevance for future research.

**Implications for wellness professionals.** Regular physical activity and exercise have been shown to play a vital role in preventing health and cardiovascular diseases. Benefits include reduced stress and anxiety, improved self-confidence, increased cognitive functioning and memory, stroke prevention, and increased muscle and bone strength. Physical activity and exercise also help in the prevention and reduction of heart disease, obesity, cardiovascular diseases, and cancer (Mohammed, 2016). The participants in my study described coming away with more personal awareness and a greater sense of accomplishment than they had achieved by focusing on exercise alone. Building on the embodied process of my study, and the concepts described by Niemiec et al. (2012), wellness professionals may be able to offer their clients a process that blends physical activity, mindfulness practices, and character strengths. This combination may offer clients a more holistic and complete approach to self-care as a means to overcome obstacles, facilitate increased self-awareness, and foster change by bringing the clients’ character strengths to the forefront.

**Implications for life coaches and therapists.** As noted in Chapter 3, when considering the function and process of coaching and therapeutic services as a whole, there is a strong connection to Mezirow’s (2012) stages of transformation and the emancipatory goals of learning,
self-discovery, autonomy, and behaviour change for both professions (Griffiths, 2006, 2015; Strozzi-Heckler, 2014). Much like the implications for wellness professionals, embodied mindfulness can create a learning process that connects bodily sensation with thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, as well as draw out character strengths and other positive attributes. Coaches could use this process for a deeper form of reflection and discourse for their clients. For therapists, this process may complement the philosophy and practices of body-based trauma treatment like those used by Strozzi-Heckler (2014), and of yoga therapy for the treatment of PTSD and trauma (Cook-Cottone et al., 2017; Emmerson et al., 2009; Macy et al., 2015; Rhodes, 2014, 2015).

**Implications for transformative learning educators.** According to Taylor and Cranton (2013), the scholarship surrounding transformative learning theory is growing and evolving. However, they noted that much of the research is redundant and acknowledged that there is a need for more in-depth theoretical analysis and original research. They posed specific issues that need to be addressed, three of which are touched upon within my study: empathy, the desire to change, the need for research involving other approaches (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). I discuss the implications of these three issues in turn.

**Empathy and self-compassion.** Historically, critical reflection, dialogue, and experience have been central to transformative learning theory (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). However, missing from these core components of transformative learning theory is empathy, which is seen as the ability to experience and share in another person’s psychological state or feelings (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). Taylor and Cranton (2013) noted that empathy is considered significant to transformative learning, yet rarely does the literature define it or discuss it in necessary detail. They have also expressed that more research is needed to better understand how empathy fosters transformative learning. They posed two questions in particular: What is the relationship
between critical reflection and empathy in transformative learning? Does transformation lead to greater empathy?

Neff (2012) noted that self-compassion is associated with greater wisdom and emotional intelligence, suggesting that self-compassion represents a way of dealing with difficult emotions. Neff also noted evidence that self-compassion benefits interpersonal relationships and stimulates parts of the brain associated with compassion in general. Her preliminary findings suggest that self-compassion is linked to concern for others; however, this link is complex, requires more research, and could differ according to age and life experiences. Neff and Pommier (2012) examined these differences among college undergraduates, an older community sample, and individuals practicing Buddhist meditation. Self-compassion was significantly linked to compassion and empathetic concern for others among the community of older adults and Buddhist samples, but not for the undergraduates. The researchers suggested that the sense of interconnectedness that encourages kindness toward self and others may not develop until later in life (Neff & Pommier, 2012).

Mills et al. (2015) proposed that the practice of self-care be a professional expectation for nurses and noted that it would questionable whether nurses would practice self-care if they were not explicitly trained or required to do so. Central to my study findings was the role of support and self-compassion in embodied learning and self-care. The embodied process used in the current study has implications for practice and future research. Educators could consider practicing self-compassion through acts of self-care for both their personal needs and professional standards, and to show empathy for themselves as well as their students. They could also use an embodied process as a method for training, practicing, and encouraging self-compassion amongst others, regardless of age. In consideration of Neff and Pommier’s (2012)
findings that age may be a factor in empathy, practicing self-compassion through an embodied process, in an environment designed to encourage self-compassion, may help individuals develop it at an earlier age.

**Desire and prompts for change.** Taylor and Cranton (2013) have acknowledged the general assumption that transformative learning is voluntary and that individuals need to be open and willing to engage in the process. However, the beginning stage of the process has not been clearly addressed by those writing about transformative learning. In the current study, curiosity and a willingness to learn were evident at the start of each participant’s self-care journey. As I noted, within the events leading up to the decision to participate, a process may have been working at a deeper level than consciousness alone. As with empathy and self-compassion, engaging in an embodied process has implications for both practice and future research. Educators may be able to help individuals gain greater clarity about their motivations for change by guiding learners through a process that inherently connects thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. Researchers may gain new perspectives on disorienting dilemmas and nondetermining starts.

**New methodologies.** Taylor and Cranton (2013) stated that interpretive methodology is a typical methodology in research on transformative learning, wherein the researcher interviews a small number of individuals in a specific context and reports on a small number of themes based on the thematic analysis. However, they have maintained that this approach has reached a point at which nothing new is being learned (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). They have also called for more research in other cultures; in particular, European researchers. Although my study falls under what Taylor and Cranton (2013) would consider a form of research that may not be new, I suggest that its unique contribution comes from the merging of ancient and Western practices of chakras and self-care. This blend of paradigms offers both practitioners and researchers some
benefit. The integration of ancient and Western practices as an embodied process of self-care could connect emotions felt through the body to the rational mind. This embodied process of reflection and discourse could also provide concrete tools to widen a learner’s perspective, as well as discover and employ strengths for better learning.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

Embodied learning is an emerging practice and requires more study. Conceptualizing the body and self-care within the context of transformative learning could be viewed as broad in scope, and as such, it has its limitations. In this section, I consider the limitations and delimitations of the study.

Single case selection may be considered both a limitation and a strength of this study. Yin (2012, 2014) favoured a multiple case approach because it allows the researcher to make better data comparisons, which then provides greater confidence in the findings and conclusions. On the other hand, Merriam (2009b) and Stake (2006) have stressed the benefits of single case design because it is more manageable and because it allows the researcher to delve deeper into the data, which then offers a rich, holistic account of the phenomenon. The study of a single experience can yield worthwhile results. My single case study approach ensured that all participants were experiencing a common phenomenon, which not only made data collection more manageable but also allowed me to explore the data in greater detail. The obvious limitation is that the experiences, essences, and results may not be indicative of different populations. Further studies in different environments could yield additional data for comparisons.

I intentionally did not ask demographic questions regarding sexual orientation, marital status, education, or level of household income. I felt it was important to establish trust so that
the participants would feel comfortable sharing whatever information they felt was important. I believe that this approach, although limiting in some ways, could also be considered a strength of the study, in that the participants did provide a rich data set. These variables, as well as past experiences and familiarity with physical activity, may have an impact on the experience of the self, body, and physical activity. Further studies with these variables in mind may yield different results.

Within my study there was an uneven distribution of male to female participants. Four participants were female whereas only one was male. This distribution difference also showed up during my recruitment period. The majority of respondents who showed an interest in participating were female. I attempted to account for this discrepancy in my participant selection; my goal was to have a similar number of male and female participants. Two male respondents, other than Participant 1, agreed to participate but later chose not to begin the study. As mentioned, participants could use any exercise comfortable to them, so in theory this scope would not be a hindrance to male participation. Despite the gender differences, there appear to be no obvious differences in the degree of openness, experience of the study, or themes that emerged within the participants’ accounts. In short, the accounts within the study do not appear to have been influenced by gender. However, the recruitment and participation ratio differences are worth noting, and when looking at the broader general population, or within specific groups, there may a difference in experience for males and females.

I believe that the pre and post assessments, 6-week questionnaire, and single post session interview yielded rich data. To expand on the current findings, future research could include more in-depth, multistaged interviewing to engage the participants further and provide additional data for clarity around concepts, themes, and participant accounts.
“Humans are meaning making organisms” (MacKeracher, 2004, p. 7), and no study of this type is without the influence of the researcher. The researcher is acknowledged as an integral data collection instrument, collecting data through observing behaviour, examining documents, and interviewing (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009b; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2012, 2014). My personal history, experiences, biases, and interactions have all influenced the selection of a qualitative research design, embodied learning as a focus for study, and the choice of case study as a methodology. As well, qualitative research is an interpretive inquiry, where researchers interpret what they see, hear, and understand to identify themes and the larger meaning of the findings. I have attempted to acknowledge my biases, history, personal influences, etc., in an effort to minimize any influence on the study’s participants and results.

The knowledge that the participants were sharing personal information could have impacted what they wrote in their questionnaires and assessments, and what they said in their interviews. To mitigate against this limitation, as noted in Chapter 3, participants were assigned a number to maintain confidentiality. No personal names were included in the results, and none of the participants objected to the primary forms of data collection, which were journaling through the pre and post session assessments, completing the 6-week questionnaire, and partaking in a post-study interview. I felt that all the participants were forthright and open regarding their experience and did not seem to be holding back on what they shared and experienced.

Also, all the participants in the study described the experience as positive. Participants shared openly about past and present challenges and appeared to have had a positive perspective shift from engaging in my study. It is important to acknowledge that the opposite may have happened, too. A participant may have had a negative experience, coming away with a less empowered view of him- or herself. I made every effort to make this study a respectful and
beneficial experience. I applied for, and received, ethics approval to ensure a high standard of research. Nevertheless, an individual may still have had a negative experience, as many individuals have had with physical activity. It is important to note this repercussion as a possible limitation.

**Future Considerations**

Future research into embodied learning could provide further insight into the process by which the human body can be a literal and figurative vessel for personal transformation. I have considered and discussed some of the research possibilities within Implications for Practice. I now present some other future research possibilities.

Using a qualitative research design could add to the richness of stories and deepen the understanding of the relationships individuals have with their bodies, their self-expression, and their sense of self—being comfortable in one’s skin, so to speak. The scope of such a study could be broad reaching with respect to its application, which leads to the first avenue for future research considerations. This study, in its current form, could be applied to specific populations, such as individuals who have been marginalized through their bodies and seek to reclaim their sense of self power and purpose. As noted in the Implications for Practice section, embodied learning and the process used within my study may offer individuals a method to manage or overcome challenges as well as provide concrete tools to discover and utilize strengths (e.g., perseverance). This study process may also provide a means to shift into and capture positive states and traits that are the outcomes of self-care, and facilitate increased self-awareness and potential for change by bringing one’s character strengths into view.

Nonprofit organizations that serve and support those who have left the sex trade could provide opportunities and training to these individuals to reclaim their bodies, feel empowered,
and potentially begin career training in the health and wellness industry. The LGBTQ community, particularly transgendered individuals or persons who have begun the process of gender reassignment, could explore their current and future relationship with their bodies and identity through this study format. Physical injury and its impact on agency was a constant theme with two of the participants in the current study. As such, another population in which this study process could be applied is individuals who have experienced limiting physical injuries, to explore their relationship with their body through a different lens and perhaps to see injury not as something limiting but as a catalyst for different expressions of physical activity and nurturing. Homing in even further within this population, researchers could undertake this study with military personnel, or people who have experienced sports, work or vehicle related injuries. These individuals have undergone a profound physical and psychological change through severe physical trauma such as paralysis, loss of limbs, or loss of physical function. Additionally, the applications of this study could also be used by the allied health professionals (physical therapists, occupational therapists), fitness professionals and councilors who offer treatment and support for these individuals.

Another research consideration could be to offer this study in a group format, and over a longer period of time. Conducting research in this format may provide insight into how group norms and social support impact the empowered and embodied experience. A group format could provide a constant, safe, and inspiring structure for individuals to explore themselves and their personal transformations. Conducting longitudinal studies may also shed light on whether perspective transformation through an embodied process translates into personal transformation, where individuals do not just change their views and beliefs but change their way of being for
the better. An additional suggestion would be to take each of the individual weeks within the 6-week questionnaire and create a study that delves further into that specific area of self-care.

Finally, exploring embodied learning from a cultural perspective may offer new avenues of research in transformative learning. This study displayed the benefits of blending ancient and Western philosophies for creating a holistic, enlightening, and beneficial learning experience. Just one of many considerations would be to investigate the practices of North American Indigenous Peoples, and in particular the use of the medicine wheel. The medicine wheel generally represents the interconnectivity of the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual elements of the individual, as well as the connection to the environment, which in turn influences knowledge and awareness to shape one’s life (Indigenous Corporate Training, 2013).

Conclusion

This qualitative single case study explored the relationship between physical activity and transformational learning. Specifically, it explored whether and how individuals find an empowered sense of themselves through their bodies and physical experiences. Two subquestions guided the study:

1. What enhances or promotes embodied learning, which can then help one find an empowered sense of self?

2. What role does the human body serve in transformational learning?

Embodied learning is an emerging practice in the world of transformative learning. Prior research and the results of this study suggest that consideration should be given to increasing the attention to the body and physical movement in transformational experiences. Embodied learning appears to have provided the participants in this study a new avenue for reflection, growth, and perspective transformation.
The research data gathered through pre and post assessments, the 6-week questionnaire, and semistructured interviews uncovered five themes for the first subquestion: (1) curiosity and a willingness to learn, (b) reflection, (c) examination for personal improvement, (d) support, and (e) character strengths. The findings and analysis supported the hypothesis that the body plays a role in promoting transformative learning and an empowered sense of self as displayed through four qualities found from the analysis of the second subquestion: (a) thoughtfulness, (b) personal acknowledgement, (c) health and wholeness, and (d) the affirmation of oneself.

Results provide insights for ongoing discussion on the role of embodied learning and the overarching themes within transformative learning, which are disorienting dilemmas, reflection, and discourse. Results also have implications for practice for personal and professional coaches, therapists, wellness professionals, and educators who regularly use transformative learning practices. Further research based on the study in its current form could be explored: in a group format, for specific populations who may have been marginalized through their bodies, and to address the areas of consideration posed by Taylor and Cranton (2013).

It was evident from the participants’ experiences that their engagement in the study had a positive impact on self-care, sense of self, and perspective change. Knowledge about transformative learning theory has continued to grow, and with new conceptions of and research trends into transformative learning emerging, this research contributes to the growing body of research that has brought attention back to the physical body as a source of learning and transformation.
References


Bhuyan, K. K. (2004). Health promotion through self-care and community participation:
Elements of a proposed programme in the developing countries. *BMC Public Health, 4.*

https://doi.org/10.1177/0273475313494010

Brendel, W., & Bennett, C. (2016). Learning to embody leadership through mindfulness and
https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422316646068


Brown, B. (2010). *The gifts of imperfection: Let go of who you think you’re supposed to be and
embrace who you are.* Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing.

http://doi.org/10.122iIJACE,20.1.B

Carleton, R. N. (2016). Fear of the unknown: One fear to rule them all? *Journal of Anxiety
Disorders, 41*, 5–21. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2016.03.011

Cartwright, C., Gibson, K., & Read, J. (2018). Personal agency in women’s recovery from
depression: The impact of antidepressants and women’s personal efforts. *Clinical
Psychologist, 22*, 72–82. https://doi.org/10.1111/cp.12093


https://doi.org/10.17744/mehc.34.3.930020422n168322


https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344617715710


*Journal of Transformative Education, 6*(2), 104–123.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344608322678


https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344617696969


Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Form

Dear Participant:

I am doing a primary research project for the completion of my master’s thesis. The title of the project is: The Embodied Experience and Transformative Learning. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the relationship between physical interventions, transformational learning and finding an empowered sense of oneself through one’s body for adults over 18. The first objective is to gain an understanding of whether or not critical reflection, transformational learning and empowerment manifest through a physical experience. The second objective is to articulate the process and interpret the connections in the somatic experience.

Should you decide to become a participant, over a period of six weeks you will be asked to engage in a minimum of two episodes of exercise/week, 30 to 60 minutes in duration with a minimum exertion of 9 on the Borg Exertion Scale. Copies of the Borg Exertion Scale, Safety Tips and a PAR-Q physical activity readiness questionnaire will be provided along with a one on one briefing on safe exercise technique. The exercise chosen is at your discretion. For example, it can be a mind/body group exercise class such as Yoga or Pilates, a more vigorous group exercise class like indoor cycling or circuit training, or an individualized resistance training program, walking, jogging, etc. Within one hour, you are asked to journal about your experience by utilizing the six-week journalling guide provided.
Prior to commencing, you will be briefed on the guide and have an opportunity ask any questions you may have. Each week within the guide is a different concept of self-care/empowerment. Week one starts with self-care—attending to oneself and balancing one’s own needs with the needs of others as the foundation. Week two explores the concept of safety and support from others. Week three explores creative personal expression/joy. Week four explores our sense of self/personal achievement skills (confidence, self-esteem, self-worth…). Week five explores self-love, accepting love, compassion and inner peace. Week six explores communication, self-expression of feelings and personal needs. A follow-up questionnaire will also be provided at the conclusion of the six weeks.

If you are interested in participating in the project, please feel free to contact me at [email address] or [telephone number]. If you have any further questions about the project you may also contact my thesis advisor Dr. Janet Groen at [email address] or [telephone number]. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Marco Iafrate

M.A. (candidate): Adult Learning
Appendix B: Six-Week Questionnaire Including Pre- and Post-Assessments

Prework

Each week within the guide is a different concept of self-care/empowerment. Each section includes: inquiry/exploration statements that are specific to each concept of self-care/empowerment, and a weekly observation section for journalling observations from the physical activity session. If you participate in more than two physical activity sections, feel free to add in the extra date and notes; and a section for additional thoughts/open journalling. Prior to commencing please complete the following questions.

1) Rate your level of satisfaction in each area of self-care/personal empowerment (1 very dissatisfied, 10 fully satisfied and expressed):
   a) ability to make myself a priority
   b) support for your self-care/empowerment from others
   c) expressing personal joy and passion
   d) sense of self (confidence, achievement skills, etc.)
   e) expressing compassion and self love
   f) communicating self-care/personal empowerment needs to others

2) How do you feel about your ratings when you look at them? Any surprises?

3) Is there an area of self-care/empowerment you would most like to improve?

4) How would improving your self-care/empowerment impact your life?

5) What, if anything, has been stopping you from practicing self-care/empowerment regularly? What do you need to release/work through?

6) Please answer the following questions
   a) Taking time for myself is…
b) My body is a source of …

c) The relationship I have with my body is…

d) Physical movement is a source of…

**Week 1: Self-Care/Empowerment**

1) Rate yourself on the following—1 very dissatisfied, 10 fully satisfied and expressed:

   - I feel grounded and settled
   - I am the master of myself, care and body
   - I am healthy
   - I take care of my needs
   - I easily put my needs as a top priority
   - I value myself
   - I nurture myself
   - I feel guilty putting my needs first

2) Which of these statements is most difficult for you to embrace? Why?

3) Which of these statements is easiest for you to embrace? Why?

4) a) Which of these statements resonates most with you? Why?

   b) Based on the above, what do you think you need to release and/or embrace to move towards more self-care/empowerment?

**Weekly Observations**

5) What was your dialogue with yourself and/or about your body while you were participating in physical activity?

   **Physical Activity Date:**

   **Notes:**
6) How did you relate to your body as you worked through this concept?

7) Open journalling/additional thoughts

**Week 2: Support/Community for Your Self-Care/Empowerment**

1) Rate yourself on the following — 1 very dissatisfied, 10 fully satisfied and expressed:
   - I feel grounded and settled
   - I feel safe and secure
   - I am supported (by friends, family)
   - I support myself
   - I ask for support
   - Fear of disappointing people (friends, family) in my daily life at work and home

2) Which of these statements is most difficult for you to embrace? Why?

3) Which of these statements is easiest for you to embrace? Why?

4) a) Which of these statements resonates most with you? Why?

   b) Based on the above, what do you think you need to release and/or embrace to move towards more support/community?

**Weekly Observations**

5) What was your dialogue with yourself and/or about your body while you were participating in physical activity?

Physical Activity Date:

Notes:

Physical Activity Date:
Notes:

6) How did you relate to your body as you worked through this concept?

7) Open journalling/additional thoughts

**Week 3: Expression of Personal Joy and Passion**

1) Rate yourself on the following—1 very dissatisfied, 10 fully satisfied and expressed:

   - I am passionate about myself
   - I am passionate about my self-care and empowerment
   - I look at life with joy and fulfillment
   - I am creative
   - I embrace change
   - I generate new ideas easily
   - I am joyful
   - I am open to using my creative talents
   - I am open to expressing creative energy

2) Which of these statements is most difficult for you to embrace? Why?

3) Which of these statements is easiest for you to embrace? Why?

4 a) Which of these statements resonates most with you? Why?

   b) Based on the above, what do you think you need to release and/or embrace to move towards more joy and passion?

**Weekly Observations**

5) What was your dialogue with yourself and/or about your body while you were participating in physical activity?

   Physical Activity Date:
Notes:

Physical Activity Date:

Notes:

6) How did you relate to your body as you worked through this concept?

7) Open journaling/additional thoughts

**Week 4: Personal Achievement Skills**

1) Rate yourself on the following—1 very dissatisfied, 10 fully satisfied and expressed:
   - I am resilient
   - I am persistent and perseverant
   - I am confident and self-assured
   - I deserve to be successful abundant and happy
   - I am worthy
   - I am connected to my inner strength
   - I embrace mistakes and adversity
   - I learn from mistakes and adversity

2) Which of these statements is most difficult for you to embrace? Why?

3) Which of these statements is easiest for you to embrace? Why?

4) a) Which of these statements resonates most with you? Why?
   b) Based on the above, what do you think you need to release and/or embrace to move towards more joy and passion?

**Weekly Observations**

5) What was your dialogue with yourself and/or about your body while you were participating in physical activity?
6) How did you relate to your body as you worked through this concept?

7) Open journalling/additional thoughts

**Week 5: Emotions, Openness, Forgiveness, Love of Self**

1) Rate yourself on the following—1 very dissatisfied, 10 fully satisfied and expressed:

- I love and honour myself
- I am loved
- I am open to opening myself up
- I am peaceful
- I am compassionate
- I am willing to feel my feelings
- I am willing to let others in
- I forgive easily
- I am tolerant

2) Which of these statements is most difficult for you to embrace? Why?

3) Which of these statements is easiest for you to embrace? Why?

4 a) Which of these statements resonates most with you? Why?

   b) Based on the above, what do you think you need to release and/or embrace to move towards more joy and passion?

**Weekly Observations**
5) What was your dialogue with yourself and/or about your body while you were participating in physical activity?

Physical Activity Date:

Notes:

Physical Activity Date:

Notes:

6) How did you relate to your body as you worked through this concept?

7) Open journaling/additional thoughts

**Week 6: Self-Expression**

1) Rate yourself on the following—1 very dissatisfied, 10 fully satisfied and expressed:

- I ask for support
- I ask for what I want easily
- I ask the universe for what I want and need
- I am heard
- I value my opinion and voice
- I am willing to have difficult discussions
- I feel guilty putting my needs first

2) Which of these statements is most difficult for you to embrace? Why?

3) Which of these statements is easiest for you to embrace? Why?

4 a) Which of these statements resonates most with you? Why?

   b) Based on the above, what do you think you need to release and/or embrace to move towards more joy and passion?

**Weekly Observations**
5) What was your dialogue with yourself and/or about your body while you were participating in physical activity?

Physical Activity Date:

Notes:

Physical Activity Date:

Notes:

6) How did you relate to your body as you worked through this concept?

7) Open journaling/additional thoughts

Post Session Questionnaire

1) Rate your level of satisfaction in each area of self-care/personal empowerment (1 very dissatisfied, 10 fully satisfied and expressed)
   a) Ability to make oneself a priority
   b) Support for your self-care/empowerment from others
   c) Expressing joy and passion
   d) Sense of self (confidence, achievement skills…)
   e) Expressing compassion and self-love
   f) Communicating self-care/personal empowerment needs to others

2) When compared to the pre-work ratings, was there a change in your ratings? Y/N

3) Did committing to improving your self-care/empowerment positively impact your life? Please elaborate.

4) Please answer the following questions:
   a) Taking time for myself is…
   b) My body is a source of …
c) The relationship I have with my body is…

d) Physical movement is a source of…

5) What were your observations of the process of using physical activity as method for self-care/empowerment? What did you learn about your body? What did you learn from your body?

6) Additional thoughts
Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

Name of Researcher: Marco Iafrate, M.A. (candidate)
Supervisor: Dr. J. Groen
Title of Project: The Embodied Experience and Transformative Learning

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. The intent is to give you an understanding of what the research is about and what the participation will involve. If you have any questions or concerns, would like more detail about the study and/or your participation in it, or information not included below, please feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information. The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

Purpose of the Study The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the relationship between physical interventions, transformational learning and finding an empowered sense of oneself through one’s body for adults over 18. The objectives are: 1) to gain an understanding of whether or not critical reflection, transformational learning and empowerment manifest through a physical experience 2) to articulate the process and interpret the connections in the experience

What Will Participants Be Asked to Do? Over a 6-week period, participants will be asked to engage in minimum of episodes of exercise/week, 30 to 60 minutes in duration with a minimum exertion of 9 on the Borg Exertion Scale (please see attached copy). The exercise chosen is at your discretion. For example, it can be a mind/body group exercise class such as Yoga or Pilates, a more vigorous group exercise class like indoor cycling or circuit training, or an individualized resistance training program, walking, jogging, etc. Within one hour, you are asked to journal about your experience by utilizing the six-week journaling guide provided.

Prior to commencing, you will be briefed on the guide and have an opportunity ask any questions you may have. Each week within the guide is a different concept of self-care/empowerment. Week one starts with self-care—attending to oneself and balancing one’s own needs with the needs of others as the foundation. Week two explores the concept of safety and support from others. Week three explores creative personal expression/joy. Week four explores our sense of self/personal achievement skills (confidence, self-esteem, self-worth…). Week five explores self-love, accepting love, compassion and inner peace. Week six explores communication, self-expression of feelings and personal needs.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected? Responses to the questions will be considered public; however, participants will remain anonymous. Generic identifiers: Participant
1, Participant 2, etc… labels will be assigned in order to maintain confidentiality. No personal names will be written in the final results.

Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate? Any risks are those associated with normal exercise. Prior to beginning participants will be briefed on how to monitor personal exertion, proper exercise techniques to minimize any chance of injury as well as fill out a PAR-Q—physical activity readiness questionnaire—to determine whether or not they are physically prepared to take on the exercise of choice. At no point during the study will they be asked or required to exert themselves beyond what they deem to be appropriate and safe. Participation in this project is intended to have no negative impact on your fitness facility or workplace. The intended benefits are as follows: a better understanding of individual learning processes and individual abilities, a method for initiating learning events, developing better learners and learning experiences, better workplace cohesion, a method for initiating learning events in the workplace, a greater understanding of where the empowered individual is situated in the workplace and how this can carry over into society as a whole, improved communication between workers and management and inclusion of new policies that improve workplace well-being. The one request is that these intended benefits written here are not communicated to the participants in order to not influence the direction of the study experiences. Should participants find the process valuable it may provide incentive to continue the process in both their personal and professional lives.

What Happens to the Information Provided? Interview notes will be stored in a locked drawer in my home office. In the event data is provided in Word documents, they will be stored on an external hard drive that is also secured in my home office. Access to the raw data will be limited to two people: me and my MA advisor Dr. Janet Groen. After the study is finished, they will be kept by me for two years as is required by our Faculty ethics guidelines. After that, the interview notes will be destroyed with a paper shredder and file shredder.

Signatures (written consent) Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to allow individuals to participate. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. Participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Continued participation should be as informed as the initial consent. Feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout the study.

_________________________    ___________________    ____________
Participant Name    Signature    Date

_________________________    ___________________    ____________
Investigator/Delegate’s Name    Signature    Date
Questions/Concerns If you have further questions concerning matters related to this research, please contact: 1) Marco Iafrate [telephone number], 2) Dr. J. Groen [telephone number] [email address]. If you have any concerns about the way you’ve been treated as a participant, please contact the Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services, University of Calgary at (403) 220-3782, email: cfreb@ucalgary.ca

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.
Appendix D: Safety Tips and Borg Scale of Perceived Exertion

Safety Tips

• Fill out an appropriate health screening questionnaire, such as the PAR-Q and consult your personal physician about your health status.

• After you have been cleared to exercise, determine your appropriate exercise level and target heart rate (THR).

To calculate your target heart rate:

\[
\text{Maximum heart rate (MHR)} = 220 - \text{Age} \\
\text{Resting heart rate (RHR)} \\
\text{Target Intensity—Beginner} = 55 \text{ to } 60\% \\
\text{Fat Burning} = 70 \text{ to } 75\% \\
\text{Cardiovascular Training} = 80 \text{ to } 85\% \\
\text{Target heart rate} = \text{Resting heart rate} + (\text{Target Intensity} \times [\text{MHR-RHR}])
\]

For modifications for health conditions such as hypertension, obesity, cardio-pulmonary conditions, etc., seek the advice of a health care professional to determine your appropriate target heart rate.

• Warm-up and cool down adequately. Take 5 to 10 minutes for a general warm-up with a light cardiovascular exercise to prepare the body for exercise. Take 5 to 10 minutes to stretch and cool down after your workout to reduce your heart rate and exertion level.

• DO NOT ignore or work through pain. Pain is an indicator that something is not right. Rest, modify your technique, and re-evaluate. If the pain persists, stop the exercise.

• With new exercises and programs, start light and work towards a more difficult program. Use spotters and progress into harder exercises slowly and safely.

• Avoid jerking movements, locking out the joints and lifting weights beyond your capabilities. Avoid overexertion during cardiovascular work.

• Use a full range of motion except for certain exercises like leg squats where a full range
of motion takes the joints beyond a stable position.

• Maintain proper body alignment and technique. To keep the spine, neck and head in neutral position: keep the chin parallel to the floor by looking straight ahead, relax the shoulders, push your chest out slightly, and avoid letting the hips curl towards the front of your body. Think: when in doubt, chest out.

• Breathe and keep the deep abdominal muscles activated. Breathing should be controlled and rhythmic. A general rule is to breathe out while you are exerting yourself through an exercise and breathe in while returning to the start of the exercise. To keep the deep abdominal muscles activated, pull your belly button in and think of breathing out through a straw. This helps to maintain proper body alignment.

• Look over equipment. Get familiar with it and make sure it is in working order.

• Exercise considerations—work out accordingly, taking into account your health history, abilities and goals.

**Borg Scale of Perceived Exertion**

6 No exertion at all
7 Extremely light
8
9 Very light (easy walking slowly at a comfortable pace)
10
11 Light
12
13 Somewhat hard (It is quite an effort; you feel tired but can continue)
14
15 Hard (heavy)
16
17 Very hard (very strenuous, and you are very fatigued)
18
19 Extremely hard (You cannot continue for long at this pace)
20 Maximal exertion
Appendix E: Life Wheel Assessment

I downloaded the Wheel of Life assessment and template from Simplicity Life Coaching (2017); permission for reuse is included in the retrieval.

Complete the Wheel

1. Review the 10 wheel categories.

2. Next, draw a line across each segment that represents your satisfaction score for each area.

   - The centre of the wheel is 0 and the outer edge is 10.
• Choose a value between 1 (very dissatisfied) and 10 (fully satisfied).
• Now draw a line and write the score alongside (see example).
• It is **IMPORTANT** to use the FIRST value that pops into your head, not the number you think it *should* be!

**EXAMPLE**

![Diagram with values 1 to 10]
Appendix F: Post Session Coaching Recap

My post session recap is a modified version of a recap originally provided by my former mentor coach at Alchemy Coaching. Permission for use and modification was provided in the client/mentor coach agreement.

Post Session Recap

To maximize the value of your coaching, please take some time to internalize your session. Some options include: Journaling—10 to 20 minutes of contemplating the session and what you are present to.

Answer some or all the questions below. This feedback can be very helpful to both of us. I always reflect on what constitutes the most effective coaching tools for you, and this recap is invaluable. It is an integral part of the coaching process. Please return to the original template I have supplied you, fill in the blanks, and send. Email it to me as soon as you’ve completed it. If it works better for you, choose your own style of feedback/celebration/request for your coach.

My greatest insight(s) or “new understanding(s)” during our session is (are):

A shift in thinking or new habit(s) I’m working on is (are):

An intention (or intentions) I’m making and will share with my coach is (are):

A question(s) or idea(s) I have that we didn’t discuss is (are):

Something that would make our coaching session more effective, useful and/or FUN:

I understand my next 2 sessions to be _______ at _______ and _______ at________.
Appendix G: Interview Schedule

Thank you for your time and participation in my six-week study, and thank you for taking the time to follow that up with an interview.

The purpose of the interview is to hear more about your experience of the study following its completion.

With each of the questions we will go through please note that you are under no obligation to answer all the questions. You may answer them in whichever way you feel comfortable and with whatever comes to mind. The interview will be recorded and transcribed with your permission.

Please feel free to contact me with further comments or questions at any time after the interview. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1) Let’s start with some questions to get to know you. Tell me about your typical day/week (work, family, friends, age, leisure, thinks you like to learn, outlook on life).

2) What motivated you to start the study?

3) How did you feel first coming into the study? What was your sense of yourself?

4) What motivated you to finish the study?

5) What did you find most meaningful about this experience?

6) What was your experience of the questionnaire as an exploratory tool and the process of using it?

7) Were there any challenges? Did this process give you a new perspective on challenges? How to approach them, what they mean to you?

8) How has this experience changed you? What did you learn about yourself? Did it give
you a new perspective/appreciation for physical movement and the body?

9) What does “energy” mean to you? Do your body and physical movement serve a role in it? If, so how?

10) What does “strength” mean to you? Do your body and physical movement serve a role in it? If, so how?

11) What does “transformation” mean to you?

12) What are three words to describe your experience? Which one is most important? Why?

13) Anything else come to mind? Anything more you would like to add?