

Stephan Perdekamp and Sarah Victoria tell **Jane Jones** how recognising and managing innate emotional movement patterns can lead to better health.

Innate patterns of emotion

CONVERSATIONS

JONES: Stephan, you originally developed the Perdekamp Emotional Method (PEM) as a tool for actors to access emotions in a safe way, without having to rely on their own emotional memories, and it has generated such interest that now it is also being used in other settings, such as prisons and schools. I went to a recent workshop you held and was struck by much that will have resonance for human givens practitioners. Both HG and PEM share an aspiration that, through understanding their biology and psychology, people can better deal with challenges and avoid many problems. Both also have an acute awareness of the influence of environment, society and culture and have an interest in bringing self-understanding. Perhaps you could talk us through how PEM came about.

PERDEKAMP: There were a few things. One was a colleague almost killing her husband after a performance because she was still so in role. Petrified, the state that she had been portraying, she picked up a knife and stabbed him almost to death. German law at the time, I learned, allowed reduced liability for actors up to three hours after a performance, because of this sort of thing. Another thing I observed was that actors, much more than dancers and singers, were likely to take drugs, mostly alcohol, both to free up enough to get into their part and, even more so, after the performance, to get out of their high-emotion state and the traumas that they had been performing. It looked like a very abusive profession.

The other side of it was energy work. I did not train as an actor – I came from the directing side. What is interesting for me in stage acting is when there is real, live energy between people. When I tried to find out how people get that, there was no real answer to it. I spent about 10 years in big theatres, small theatres, film, in front of the camera and behind it, and I found nobody who could show me how to create energy reliably or how to get into emotions without damage. The result is that theatre is often theatrical in a bad way because people cannot bring themselves fully every time into the pain or hurt that they are enacting. So I started researching how to create energy in the body and I looked first at muscle movements, because we use energy to enable muscle movement. We started to analyse facial expressions first and, later, body movements to find out where those energies come from. We experimented with dozens, and then hundreds, of people and realised that emotions have their own energy and their own associated physical movement patterns.

JONES: What was the impact on actors when you put together all that you discovered and started working with them in this way?

VICTORIA: Well, my own story is that I trained at a traditional acting school in Vienna, and then in London, to get a view of more international techniques. I remember one of our drama teachers used to say, “Before the performance or before the class, just drink and then come back and start to act”. And I thought that couldn’t be professional, encouraging people to become alcoholics! I tried to exploit my own life in the best way I could to put everything there on stage and after a few months I thought I was going crazy. This was in the 1990s but the problem is still there. Just a few days ago, a student at a theatre festival in Romania that I was at told me her teacher said, “If you want to do a one-on-one session with me, drink half a bottle of wine first”. So this approach isn’t in the past. I was looking for some other way and PEM showed me how to put everything together on a physical level, so as to be able to access intense emotions very easily but stay sane and healthy, and recreate those emotions reliably in every performance, every night.

JONES: And then leave them behind immediately that you’ve finished the performance.

VICTORIA: Exactly. Of course it is still draining *physically*. But it is not psychologically draining or drawing on your own personality.

JONES: PEM is now part of the curriculum at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London and at Southampton Solent University, I understand. Stephan, you have described emotions as innate muscle movement patterns, rather than feelings, and that is really interesting because most people think of emotion as something that is psychological. Yet what you say makes absolute sense from our human givens perspective because we think of emotions as one of the resources that we are born with, to help us to get our needs met. So it makes sense that there has to be movement involved at some level. Indeed, we say that movement is fundamental to the existence of brains, which developed originally to control movement, predict outcomes and learn from that. You hold, however, that emotion comes into awareness (and hence gives rise to feelings and thoughts) only if physical expression of emotion is actually blocked or prevented from being fully expressed. Could you say something more about that?

PERDEKAMP: Left to themselves, emotions tend to be localised, involuntary bundles of movement patterns. If the body makes the movement and

the problem is solved (reaching for something, stepping out of the way of something) without involving the mind, then there is no awareness of the emotion, no 'feeling'.

JONES: That chimes with something that neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux says in his latest book, *Anxious* (see page 56): that the brain and body responses to threat detection are a motivational force that guides behaviour in the quest to stay alive but the *feeling* of fear is not necessarily part of the process. We may well become aware of danger at some point and start consciously to weigh up the risks, and worry about our safety. But we have no evidence, he says, that when prey flee from predators, they are actually feeling fear.

PERDEKAMP: That is interesting. We have learned that we can feel emotions, and sense emotions in our own and other people's bodies, even before the muscles move or when the movement is very tiny. At that point, we are just getting focused on what we might do next but are not really doing it yet. Most people, however, observe emotions only when suppression mechanisms do not work anymore, and they break out – for instance, in shouting or crying. So they think loss of control of emotion equals emotion.

JONES: Could you give us an example?

PERDEKAMP: Okay, let's take 'aggression'. Aggression is a movement designed to get us grounded – the legs and hips move downwards – so that we can press forward, to push something out of the way or move through something. For that we need to focus with our eyes on the one spot we want to get through – it is what we call concentration. Sometimes, when an adult is really focused on reading something, a child may ask, "Are you angry?" The grown ups are always very surprised – "No, no, I'm just reading" – but the child feels the movement pattern of it, that when the eyes focus forward you are already in the movement pattern of aggression. But the movement is very tiny and it is not a problem at all. If you want to find where the door is and you look around with a concentrated look, you are already in the aggression pattern. In most cases, there is no resistance, no suppression – you go to the door and push it open. If it doesn't give easily, you push it harder till it does.

It is all aggression but, once the body achieves its goal, it lets go of the energy pattern. This is because the body wants to save energy and is one of our most fundamental observations of bodies – that, if they are not forced to use emotions, they are completely quiet, because they do not like to waste energy. A lot of what we do is to *gain* energy. Getting heat, clothing and food is all about getting enough energy to live. So the idea that people go on raging rampages if they don't suppress emotions is energetically a very weird idea. It would be like animals running on the plains until they drop dead. There is no hindrance in the sky but birds fly just enough to get their food or their fun and then they sit and survive.

JONES: So what is the explanation for our misunderstanding?

PERDEKAMP: Culture. When we look back at feudalism, most people were oppressed, suffering in their everyday lives in ways that we can't even imagine. They were starving, freezing, not allowed to express themselves, to use their talents, so their bodies were full of movement patterns that they could not fulfil. If they ever got the chance to let go, they might do it in a way that seemed very random.

JONES: You have talked vividly about the impact of hierarchy on this, even in the present day.

PERDEKAMP: In a strictly hierarchical society, expression of emotion is directly linked to your position in the hierarchy. So, the higher up you are, the more randomly you are allowed to express emotion. If the boss comes in and yells that he has lost his phone, he can accuse everybody in the room, who then get in a panic and rush around trying to find his phone and, if they find out it was in his pocket all the time, they hasten to find a reason why he couldn't have been expected to know that it was there. So his random outbreak of emotion is not just allowed but is patched up by everyone else. Whereas if the caretaker dared to do the same thing and stormed about accusing people of taking his bucket, he would get fired.

JONES: Children, of course, are right down at the bottom of the hierarchy and, as you say, we *train* them to suppress emotions.

PERDEKAMP: They are the underdogs. They are told, "Don't stare. Don't shout." At school, they have to sit and follow somebody else's lead, just because they are children. Their character or their disposition or their talent doesn't matter. I remember, in the first year in school, the teaching was interrupted every five minutes by the teacher saying, "Sit still. Sit still. Sit still!" So training children to concentrate in that first year was basically a training in getting the movement motivations in the children's bodies nullified. If you got excited or bored by something, you were not allowed to move. So what you learned as a child was that, in front of authority, emotions don't count and, therefore, that your own motivations don't count. It is seen as making people fit for society. If kids decide to take the lead and do whatever they like, matching their movements to their motivations, they get labelled trouble-makers; if they give up and become withdrawn, they get called obedient – or lazy. I think feudalism was at the root of this. In human givens terms, perhaps, people were denied use of their resources and had to live to a different pace and agenda from the one that was actually given to them by nature.

As a protective reaction against the cultural conditioning, children commonly learn to suppress the movement of the diaphragm, which would otherwise support the natural movement pattern; this reduces the amount of oxygen they take in, and persists through their whole life.

JONES: Why are they trained to do that?

PERDEKAMP: Because they get punished or abused or taken advantage of when they show what



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Sarah Victoria is an actress who trained with PEM creator Stephan Perdekamp and is now a PEM Master Instructor. She studied acting, drama, art history and philosophy in Vienna and London. In 2012 she became head of PEM-International Office, leading PEM workshops in the US, UK, South Africa and Europe. She is a founding member of the first UK PEM Ensemble, now being established.

their real motivation or interest is. Some people still think children have to endure bullying, for example, because it is real life – there will always be someone bossing you around – and children have to figure out how to deal with it. One way is to reduce their own output because then they are in less danger. So they hold their breath, which means pulling the stomach in or narrowing down the ribcage, to hinder the movement of the muscles around the diaphragm. Another way is to control the eyebrows, which move up and down a lot in emotional expressions. Kids learn early on to hold them still and then there is this frozen energy around the brows, which then works back to the eyes, which connect the organic emotional impulses through the face. So, if you stop the face, you can suppress the emotional reaction. The ‘poker face’ comes from techniques we develop early so as not to betray our emotions.

VICTORIA: When you learn how to handle and manage emotions better, it has, of course, a huge impact on your personal life. I come from Austria, where the whole culture is hugely about suppressing emotions. As a child and teenager, I suppressed a lot of fear, although I didn’t know what I was suppressing until I did the PEM class. I was so frozen and hard and tough inside that I didn’t recognise the pattern anymore – I didn’t know that I was afraid. So, if someone had asked me, I would have said I was not afraid. I also had illnesses like asthma and dermatitis, and I had panic attacks. After a period of time with PEM, all that stopped happening, because it was all linked to this fear that I didn’t recognise.

PERDEKAMP: Training people to suppress emotions is like teaching people to drive with the handbrake on, to prevent accidents. Of course, what happens is that, if someone decides to let go of the handbrake, they go much too fast and crash into walls and each other. They don’t know how to handle the situation. What we are trying to do is teach people how to drive. It is not about the handbrake. It is about knowing when to stop, when to accelerate, what speed is appropriate for the situation you are in, etc. It is interesting that we all understand how necessary it is to teach people how to drive a car but as for learning to move our bodies in a sensible way, we just hope it happens.

JONES: At the workshop, you used another strong driving analogy. You said we give people lessons, get them to take a test and then, ever afterwards, we are quite happy to leave them free to drive these powerful, potentially killer machines. Yes, a few may drink or take drugs or text at the wheel, and cause terrible accidents, but we consider those the exception and that most people can be trusted just to get on with it safely. Yet, with emotions, we do the opposite and

immediately assume that everyone will behave in a reckless, frightening manner if we let them express themselves. Again, it would only be the few who do that.

Therapists might sometimes be concerned, however, about clients becoming highly emotional in a session. From our perspective, it is difficult to engage with a person’s rational brain when they are flooded with emotion, so we endeavour to calm them down quickly if they become emotional. I know that your work comes from a background of wanting actors to express emotion safely but have you experienced any untoward side effects

when encouraging people to express emotions, especially if they have previously suppressed them a lot?

PERDEKAMP: The point of the exercises we have developed is to teach actors proactive control of emotions – not by using other muscles to suppress movement but by understand-

“ Left to themselves, emotions tend to be localised, involuntary bundles of movement patterns. ”

ing the movement the body wants to make, and making it clearly and deliberately. With that, you gain control. If you look at sports professionals, the police, the army, doctors – they often find themselves in demanding situations where they have to be extremely clear and are expected to make extremely rational decisions extremely fast. So if a patient is undergoing lifesaving surgery, the surgeon is expected to make tiny hand movements, tiny cuts so as not to destroy vital nerves, amid a lot of noise and blood, and to control their physical movements cleanly and minutely. With soldiers and police it is the same thing – they are trained for it. So that is where I took my expectation for actors: if we can train emotions clearly enough and often enough, then the real energy driving those movements can be harnessed.

JONES: But if you were working with someone in Sarah’s position, who had a lot of fear linked to the past, and you were helping them get in touch with fear movements naturally, would it bring out that emotion – we would call it pattern matching – in a way that is overwhelming?

PERDEKAMP: No, because we start in tiny steps. We don’t call on strong energies before the body knows the strong movements. I think we now have over 10,000 hours’ experience of helping people with emotions – that’s 5,000 people in 38 countries, with different languages, and cultures and backgrounds – and we have not ever encountered a person breaking out in a random emotion pattern. If stronger emotions turn up, we use the energy in the exercises and work them out. We always think emotions are about psychology but, actually, they are much more like sports. So, if someone has a lot of anger, they need to go through those movements very strongly until they sweat and let go. Boxing movements, for example, can express aggression. We need to run to let go of fear. Grief is like a tug of war. What generally happens is that people get tired after

a while and the energy is gone. There is a big difference between this and emoting techniques, which are a bit like being in a room that is overheated and opening the window to let some air out, then closing it; soon the heater overheats the room again. If you don't deal with the heater, the window opening provides just a temporary release. We train people to switch off the heater or switch it down. Of course, there is a release in it but the release is worked through in a clear, physical pattern that catches the energy.

JONES: That's so interesting. From our perspective, we believe that an important function of dreaming is to defuse emotional arousal that has not been acted upon, and we know this is vital to health. From what you are saying, exercise can also be used to defuse arousal but it needs to be specific to the emotion, rather than, say, just going for a jog.

PERDEKAMP: When you run, you deplete the overall energy in the body. But if you are not in fear and are actually in aggression, the movement pattern you need is to push through. So that movement pattern is not resolved by running – you just get tired. Soon you are back to feeling aggressive again.

VICTORIA: A therapist working with children with challenging behaviour came to our grief class once and she was shocked because she could immediately see that what the children needed was not help to control their aggression but to express their grief. They had all experienced major losses of some kind. So there is such a mix-up in our society about what the emotions really are. The more you know how the pure emotion feels, the more able you are to use the right movement pattern.

JONES: Could you tell us what the basic emotions are that you teach people to identify and access more authentically?

VICTORIA: Aggression is a movement pattern of advancing, going forward and, as we have said, pushing through. We have several exercises that teach the different aspects and levels of aggression. Happiness is the movement pattern of opening up and the function is to release and to relax between stressful times. It is very different from the way it is commonly seen in our society, where the biggest goal is to be happy all the time. But, after truly experiencing the emotion of happiness, you see that you just need a few moments of it, regularly, to relax your system and *then* you can go to the next emotion to do whatever you need to do. So it is not the ultimate goal; it is just one of six basic movement patterns. But it is the only one that fully opens us up and relaxes us, after exerting ourselves in any way, letting us recover.

The moving pattern of grief is the pattern of holding onto. The function is to keep. But the emphasis on grief, in our society, is more about letting go of it, and you can't let go of it if you haven't held onto it long enough. You have to feel it and be with it before you can let it go.

Lust is the movement pattern of getting,

pulling towards you, the drive to have something you want. It's not just sexual.

JONES: Lust seems a strong word to me. Is there a reason that you use particular words to describe the basic emotions?

VICTORIA: It is because we try to find biological expressions for emotions, which is why we use the word 'aggression' and not 'anger'; 'lust' and not 'desire'. Lust feels very basic.

PERDEKAMP: And there are different qualities to all these emotions. Curiosity is a form of lust, we would say, and so is greed. So there is a range to the basic emotion – 10 per cent of lust might be curiosity and 20 per cent might be desire and 70 per cent might be greed, in its different forms.

VICTORIA: Fear is the pattern of fleeing, running away, getting out of the danger zone. It is about safety and it's our best friend, although, in our society, it is seen as our worst enemy. As I said earlier, if I had recognised that I was feeling fear and that it wasn't my enemy, I would have dealt with a few things very differently. After training in the fear exercises, you are in a position to decide whether you want to stand your ground and go into action or flee. But when we take away the fleeing pattern, when we don't know anymore *how* to flee, we can't decide if the fear is so dominant that it would be healthier to step backwards or go forward with it.

JONES: So there comes a point, when you are being authentic with emotion, when you get to make a choice – and that would apply to all emotion, including aggression. You could choose to continue with the action or go a different way. When you understand your emotions and manage them better, then you have much more freedom, because you can make choices about how you act – which fits with the HG approach.

VICTORIA: The last emotion is the pattern of pushing away, to repulse. A lot of times in life we ignore the impulse to say no, to say, "That's too close to me". We need to repulse but we are not doing it because it seems impolite. What is important for therapy, I imagine, is that, although you can clear up in your mind why you behave a certain way – because you were raised like this, or a parent did it – it doesn't mean that your body can suddenly do things differently. You keep on reacting the old way until you've retrained, and that is where the PEM exercises come in.

JONES: Can you tell us about some of the applications of the work you have explored so far, outside the world of the theatre?

PERDEKAMP: We were first asked to help with adolescents with aggression problems and we found out that using the patterns we are talking about calmed them down. The kids slept better, had better control, and there was less tension. That led to work in prisons in Germany, to help release fear and aggression, and sometimes grief, and to restore self-control. Several schools in Hamburg have invited us to train kids in an understanding of basic emotions. In Austria, we have also done work on personal development, for people who want to know more about their emotional



Jane Jones is a former GP and public health doctor, now a human givens practitioner. She has a longstanding involvement in community theatre, acting, writing and directing plays.

movement patterns for their personal or their professional life. And now we have just started working with refugees in Germany. Someone teaching German to refugees noticed that, largely because of fear, they were having huge difficulties with concentrating. Our programme will help them work out their fear, so that they can learn.

JONES: And Sarah, I think you have been involved in some work with people with Asperger's syndrome?

VICTORIA: Yes. It was very interesting to work with them because they felt the triggers to the emotional impulses much earlier than people usually do. They became able not only to recognise in themselves different emotions and how they feel but also to relate better to others. It fits with the understanding that people with Asperger's are emotional but can't usually recognise those impulses in themselves or others.

PERDEKAMP: There is also our work in business, and the main subject we work on is burn-out. For others, the problem is that they are too subdued. They know a lot but cannot necessarily bring that into their performance or communication. For instance, a nurse came to us, desperate. She had an interview for a senior position the next day. However, she had failed to get through similar interviews three times. Her ideas about how she would run the department were just marvellous, so marvellous we couldn't understand why she didn't get the jobs. But then we role-played an interview and immediately we understood why. She started to duck down and tip her body backwards and stuttered and looked confused. We worked for an hour on aggression patterns, on her standing up and pushing her ideas through. The next day she got the job.

JONES: As you've made clear, you are not therapists but you are keen to collaborate further in therapeutic work, and I wonder what comes next in this for PEM.

PERDEKAMP: One possibility is to teach therapists how to use the movement pattern of happiness in their own bodies and to project it onto the client, because the mirror effect plays a big role in emotions.

JONES: So it's a more authentic way of mirroring, perhaps.

PERDEKAMP: Another important thing is to understand the difference between emotional problems and psychological problems. In our experience, if you have an emotional problem and you try to work on it psychologically, it is a long way round to understand something. If you address the body right away, it takes 10 minutes. This is what we found in acting. People thought they had to get their subconscious convinced that they really were in danger before they could portray the emotion.

JONES: And then they really *were* in danger! An



HG colleague told me recently about an actor who came to see her, who was still traumatised by the death of her mother 30 years previously. She couldn't talk about her without crying and it was because she had drawn on that pain every time she played a character experiencing any kind of loss. She is now going to go to a PEM workshop! In the human givens, however, we mainly use psychological approaches. We do use relaxation and breathing but we don't traditionally use physical methods, so this could be another tool in our own toolkit, a way of helping people deal with the fundamentally physical

aspects of these things. Because we are, after all, embodied creatures, not minds wandering around by themselves.

VICTORIA: I have three topics that interest me personally. One is Asperger's because, with the small number of people that I coached, we saw such huge

success and progress that I would really love to hear from others, and also from anyone interested who is working with people with this condition. Also, I worked with young offenders in a prison in Scotland and they realised the huge difference between what aggression really is and what they thought it was. One said to me afterwards, "Oh I wish I had known all this before I got into trouble". It could help with rehabilitation. The final area is schools. If we can start when children are young, they will have much healthier, saner and more productive lives.

JONES: So, for any of our readers interested in knowing more or getting involved?

PERDEKAMP: They should go to <http://pem-acting.com/pem-beyond-the-arts>, where we list courses of interest to non-actors. We have a general introduction, which is the workshop you came to, where we show the basic emotions and how the programme works; and a deep relaxation programme, using 'happiness' to help therapists and clients prepare for sessions – for that one, we are happy to offer human givens therapists a £20 discount. HG therapists should contact admin.uk@pem-acting.com for this.

JONES: Thank you. This has been fascinating. I really hope this interview stimulates others to discover more about PEM. ■

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