

# LEARNED EXUBERANCE

BY FRANK FORENCICH



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# LEARNED EXUBERANCE

In the world of work, there's a lot of conversation these days about productivity and the power of engagement. Business experts and management consultants are writing and speaking at great length about commitment, purpose and performance. And of course, there's a lot of people wringing their hands about the opposite state of being, a condition called *presenteeism*. People, it seems, are showing up for work, but are not really engaged in what they are doing. (The word *presenteeism* is a play on the word *absenteeism*. It refers to a state in which workers are on the job, but "not really there.")

At the moment, presenteeism is mostly an obscure topic in the world of management and human resources, but it's really the tip of a very distressing culture-wide iceberg. That is, presenteeism is more than something that happens on the job; it's something that happens all across the modern world. Even when we go home after work, many of us are simply "going through the motions." A person may be physically present, but the spirit is absent. The organism is empty; it is following the rules, complying with requirements and doing what it must, but it has no real passion for the process. Its commitment is minimal, its exposure limited. In essence, presenteeism is a withholding of potential, creativity and intelligence. It's the opposite of exuberance.

It's impossible to measure presenteeism, of course. Our levels of engagement are always in flux and vary from context to context. One person's presenteeism may be another's full engagement. But in taking an informal look around the modern world, one gets the creepy feeling that presenteeism is a full-blown psycho-spiritual epidemic. Lots of people are in habitual retreat from life, withholding their creativity, intelligence and potential, both inside and outside the workplace.

How else are we to describe it when millions of people fail to show up for the health of their own bodies? Isn't "sedentary living" simply another name for what is, at its core, presenteeism? Say what you will about the tyranny of motorized transportation and the demands of the digital workplace, the failure to move our bodies is a failure to engage, a failure to live. Yes, people are under incredible time constraints these days, but most of us have some opportunities for physical living. But only rarely do people take advantage. Most are content to simply sit on the sidelines, running out the clock on a life that is immense in its mystery and potential.

## THE ETIOLOGY OF PRESENTEEISM

So where does this presenteeism come from? Have people always drawn back from engagement with life, content to live a shadow existence of minimal participation? Or is this a new condition, one more distressing feature of life in the modern world?

Naturally, some will suggest that presenteeism is simply a matter of character, a personality defect. People who don't engage are just lazy slackers who don't want to show up for life. They'd rather sit on the sidelines, watching TV until the grim reaper comes to take them away. They don't engage because they don't have any grit, backbone, curiosity or imagination.

This accusation surely contains a grain of truth; we've all met slackers and most of us have done our share of aimless drifting and hiding from life. But still, this can't possibly be the whole story. Character is obviously an important factor in how we show up, but other forces play a role too. And if we're going to get to the bottom of presenteeism, we're going to have to look at the big picture of human history, environment and culture.

Consider the Paleo, that vast period of human prehistory. Can we imagine presenteeism in our hunting and gathering ancestors? Hardly. After all, every day on the grassland was a survival challenge; life itself was a near-death experience. Awareness was paramount and inattention was swiftly and brutally punished. Psycho-physical engagement was the very thing that kept us alive.

To appreciate this immediacy of this challenge, just think of the lions, leopards and tigers that prowled the land, ready to kill and eat anything that moved, including bipedal primates. We can be sure that the predators of the Paleolithic were fully engaged in their lives; obviously, there was no such thing as *feline presenteeism*. Any human who wanted to continue living would have to be equally alert and engaged.

So clearly, something must have happened on the way to modernity. Sometime in the last 10,000 years, we lost our intensity, our focus and our willingness to engage. The most obvious explanation is simply that we have become pampered by agriculture, industry and convenience. Modernity is, in some respects, a free ride. We killed off most of the predators and most of us have an ample supply of food and a safe place to sleep. In the grand scope of human history, this is unprecedented luxury. For the first time, we can slack off without threat of immediate death. We can be lazy. We can be apathetic. When it comes to presenteeism, we do it because we can get away with it.

## LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

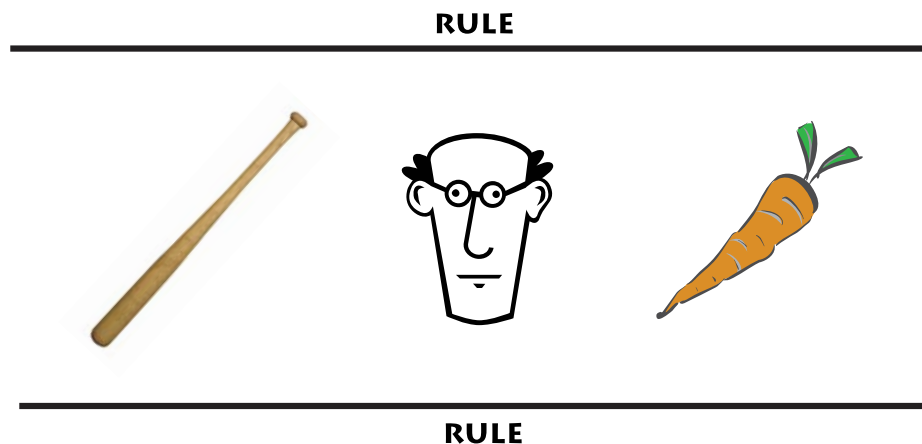
But presenteeism is more than just a character defect and it's more than just lounging in the soft womb of modern civilization. There's something else here, something that is wearing down our spirits and our exuberance. That thing is chronic stress and its close relative, "learned helplessness."

First described by pioneering psychologist Martin Seligman, learned helplessness is a state of resignation and apathy that comes from extended exposure to inescapable stress. In laboratory tests, Seligman discovered that chronically-stressed animals showed far less resilience and persistence in solving new challenges. In other words, they tended to generalize their chronically-stressed experience to other non-stressful situations. They learned, in other words, to be helpless.

The implication is chilling. I believe that what we are now seeing in the modern world is an epidemic of learned helplessness, showing up as presenteeism. We are the animals in the cage, stressed repeatedly without chance of escape. We fight the stress for years on end until finally, we capitulate. Our spirits give in and we begin to generalize our experience to any other circumstance that we might encounter. Even when we do get our freedom, we don't trust it. We play it safe, refusing to risk, refusing engage, refusing to get involved.

Our crushing stress burden is exacerbated by the structure of modern organizations, many of which seem intentionally designed to produce presenteeism and learned helplessness. Psychologist Barry Schwartz makes this point in his book, *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to do the Right Thing*. For Schwartz, the modern organization consists of two basic elements: rules and incentives.

In small doses, rules and incentives are easily tolerated, but as they grow, they begin to change the very nature of the human work experience. Rules become overbearing constraints; they squeeze our lives into increasingly narrow corridors of possible action. And within these corridors, incentives drive us towards a vision that is not our own. Freedom and autonomy begin to disappear. Instead of experiencing ourselves as wild animals and free agents, we begin to feel manipulated. Like rodents in a psychology experiment, we begin to feel helpless and ultimately, we begin to generalize this experience to the rest of our lives. We show up for work because we must, but we leave our spirits behind. In this way, presenteeism is a catastrophic response to the rigid and lifeless organizational structures of the modern age.



And so we come to one of the most striking paradoxes of modernity: On one hand, the modern agricultural system coddles us with unprecedented wealth, safety and certainty. On the other, it grinds us down with a perpetual stream of demands, a never-ending series of stressors. Some of us are fortunate; we are born into families of wealth or power and we can fight off the stressors along the way. Others get sucked into the stresspool, working multiple jobs or no job, all in the face of a never ending assault of bills, demands and requirements. Eventually, the stressors teach a toxic lesson: withdraw, disengage, retreat. Do the minimum, get by, and go home.

Learned helplessness is often described as a psychological condition, but it could just as easily be described as a disease in its own right. When an organism is dispirited and disempowered, by whatever process, it is no longer whole and fully functional. Standard biomedical tests may not reveal any particular pathology, but nevertheless, something is clearly wrong. And clearly, learned helplessness sets us up for real disease states; it is a precursor to physical illness. In this way, chronic stress and learned helplessness may in fact be the biggest threats to health in the modern world.

## **LEARNED EXUBERANCE**

So what are the antidotes to learned helplessness and presenteeism? For his part, Seligman has advocated an approach called “learned optimism.” He puts a lot of emphasis on “explanatory style” and teaches people to use more optimistic language in their daily narratives. Clearly, this can be a powerful approach. The stories that we tell about our experiences are incredibly influential in shaping our outlook, our stress resistance and our behavior. Change your story and you may very well change your interpretation of stress and in turn, its effect on your body and spirit.

Another approach is to create an alternate experience of engagement. That is, find an arena in which control, success and mastery are possible. Find a place when you can struggle, strive, learn and flourish. Develop an area of life in which personal action is meaningful and rewarding. Find a place where your actions and behavior make a difference.

The idea here is that skill, success and mastery in any domain can immunize us against stress, especially the chronic and sometimes inescapable stress of the modern work environment. When we do something well and experience the rewards of learning and mastery, we become more powerful. And, we begin to generalize from that experience: “I struggled against challenges before and I learned new skills. Next time I’m challenged, I’ll probably overcome those as well.”

Generally speaking, engagement and mastery in any realm should offer some measure of immunity against chronic stress and learned helplessness. If you take a deep dive into music, art, chess, gardening or woodworking, your participation and engagement should buffer you against the rigid demands of the modern working world. Your workplace may be a tyrannical, spirit-crushing corridor of despair, but you’ve still got your art, your music

or your sport. Your chosen discipline will sustain you with a sense of meaning.

But of all the possible domains of mastery, the physical arts offer the most promise. There's nothing so primal and powerful as moving one's own body. Nothing gives us such an intimate sense of personal and psychological control as vigorous physical striving. This is why physical practices are so essential for children. As schools become more like adult workplaces, with rigid corridors of rules and incentives, they also become factories for learned helplessness and presenteeism. The chronic, inescapable stress of the modern school saps the spirits of many children, leaving them with no choice but to withdraw and hang on for dear life.

What children need is an arena for engagement, some sort of physical discipline that offers an opportunity to exercise personal skill, judgment and mastery. Sports, dance and martial art all serve as a physical antidotes to the spiritual wasteland of the modern classroom. Give children a chance to move their bodies and learn a sense of psycho-physical control. Let them engage the world through a physical experience, striving and play. Then, when they encounter an environment of challenging stress, they'll have a positive, successful memory to fall back on. They'll be able to generalize from their prior physical success.



For adults and for kids alike, the specifics of physical engagement are largely irrelevant. It doesn't matter whether your chosen discipline is power lifting or beach volleyball, rock-climbing or dance. The most crucial elements are passion, engagement and identity. Does this activity feel like *me*? Does it give meaning to my life? Does it continue to draw me in month after month and year after year? Does it sustain me? Does it teach me that "my actions make a difference"? If so, this is your arena for learned optimism and exuberance.

When you find this practice, embrace it with your whole body and spirit. This discipline is vital to your health, your spirit and your success in other realms. It is vital, not just to you as an individual, but to our future as a people. Learned exuberance is more than just personal happiness, it's a path to a sustainable and sensible future for all of us.

# REVITALIZE YOUR BODY, YOUR PEOPLE AND YOUR ORGANIZATION

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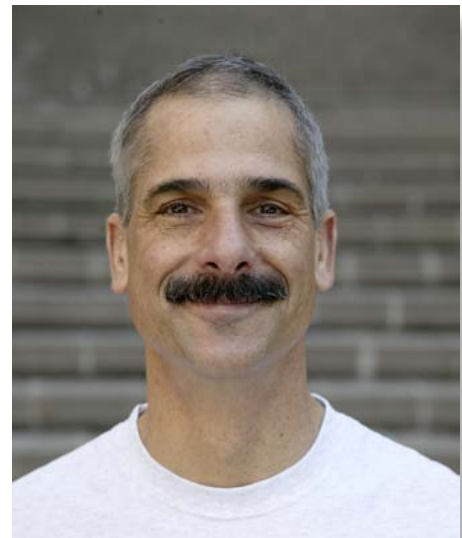


Half, full and multi-day training events are available. Contact us for details.

**F**ranks Forencich is an internationally-recognized leader in health education and performance training. He earned his B.A. at Stanford University in human biology and neuroscience and has over 30 years teaching experience in martial art, functional movement and health promotion. He holds black belt rankings in both karate and aikido and has consulted to major corporations, human resource groups and fitness professionals.

Frank has climbed mountains across North America and has traveled to Africa on several occasions to study human origins. He is the author of *Play as if Your Life Depends on It*, *Exuberant Animal*, and *Change Your Body, Change the World: Reflections on Health and the Human Predicament*.

- Partner at The National Institute for Play
- Expert consultant to WildFitness
- Featured presenter: Ancestral Health Symposium, UCLA, 2011
- Member, Ancestral Health Society
- Presenter: Serious Play Conference, 2011
- Presenter: First Annual Conference on The State of Play Science, 2008, Stanford University.
- Guest lecturer: Stanford University Institute of Design, April 2009-2011
- Featured presenter: National Applied Functional Physical Education Conference, October 2009
- Workshop leader: Baker and McKenzie Hong Kong, December 2010
- Guest speaker: TEDx Pearl River, Hong Kong



**CONTACT FRANK AT [FRANK@EXUBERANTANIMAL.COM](mailto:FRANK@EXUBERANTANIMAL.COM)**

**[WWW.EXUBERANTANIMAL.COM](http://WWW.EXUBERANTANIMAL.COM)**