

Amy Cuddy Takes a Stand

By DAVID HOCHMAN for The New York Times September 19, 2014



Amy Cuddy strikes a winning pose outside her Harvard office. Photo: Elizabeth D. Herman for The New York Times

The TED conference has made a star of many unlikely people, but perhaps no one more so than Amy Cuddy, a social psychologist and associate professor at Harvard Business School, whose talk promises personal transformation with nary a pill, cleanse or therapy bill.

Her rousing presentation in 2012 at TED Global on what she calls “power poses” is among the most viewed TED Talks of all time (it is No. 2; Sir Ken Robinson’s “How Schools Kill Creativity” is No. 1). In its wake, Ms. Cuddy, 42, has attracted lucrative speaking invitations from around the world, a contract from Little, Brown & Co. for a book to be published next year, and an eclectic army of posture-conscious followers.

Elementary school students, retirees, elite athletes, surgeons, politicians, victims of bullying and sexual assault, beleaguered refugees, people dealing with mental illness or physical limitations (including a quadriplegic): they have all written to say that adopting a confident pose — or simply visualizing one, as in that last case — delivers almost instant self-assurance.

Sheryl Sandberg of Facebook, who calls herself “a huge fan,” invited Ms. Cuddy to develop teaching materials for her Lean In initiatives. David Gergen, the director of the Harvard Kennedy School Center for Public Leadership, says her technique “gives people a taste of what it feels like to be the president striding into the cabinet room.”

Power posing showed up twice in Dilbert comic strips, and Planters nuts and Secret deodorant have developed ad campaigns around it. Lauren Bush Lauren had Ms. Cuddy speak to the staff of Feed, her nonprofit organization. “Power posing is the physical answer to mindfulness,” Ms. Lauren said.

Actress Allison Williams credited Ms. Cuddy’s research with guiding her portrayal of Marnie on “Girls,” albeit via “reverse power posing”. “Marnie has her shoulders forward, inched slightly up, and her arms folded as a line of defense,” Ms. Williams said.

People tend to do curious things after hearing Ms. Cuddy speak. Last May in Las Vegas, she told an auditorium of 1,500 Zappos employees that “making yourself big” for just two minutes before a meeting changes the brain in ways that build courage, reduce anxiety and inspire leadership. “We tested it in the lab — it really works,” she said on stage. In the lobby afterward, clusters of men and women in blue Zappos T-shirts stretched out like starfish and stood like Wonder Woman (hands on hips, legs wide) to try out the effects.

The next night at a downtown youth shelter, Ms. Cuddy clicked through images of Oprah, Freddie Mercury and Usain Bolt in expansive mode. “Let your body tell you you’re powerful and deserving, and you become more present, enthusiastic and authentically yourself,” she said to young people gathered on shabby couches. Once

again, limbs lengthened, spines straightened, shoulders drew back. A guy in board shorts and an arm cast pounded his chest like King Kong.

At 5-foot-6, Ms. Cuddy, is slender and blonde with sky-blue eyes, not big herself, even in heels. A classically trained ballet dancer and former Deadhead who once worked as a roller-skating waitress, she might come across as fragile were it not for her tendency to keep her arms away from her sides and a hand on her hip or a chair.

Women in particular often shrink in public settings, she said. The men in her Harvard classes shoot their arms straight up to answer questions, while the women tend toward a bent-elbow wave. Along with touching the face or neck or crossing the ankles tightly while sitting, “these postures are associated with powerlessness and intimidation and keep people back from expressing who they really are,” Ms. Cuddy said.



“Let your body tell you you’re powerful and deserving, and you become more present, enthusiastic and authentically yourself,” Amy Cuddy said. Photo: Sara Weinbaum

Ms. Cuddy is fortunate to be expressing anything at all, which is partly why this research is so meaningful to her. Her origin story, now familiar to the 20-million-plus viewers of her TED Talk, begins in earnest after she was thrown from a car during an accident at age 19. She was a student at University of Colorado and doctors told her she might struggle to regain full mental capacity and finish college. The brain injury she sustained caused her I.Q. to drop by two standard deviations, and though she worked her way back to academic excellence at graduate school at Princeton, she suffered acutely from impostor syndrome. She was so afraid to give her first-year talk as a Ph.D. student, she told her adviser she was quitting. Instead, she feigned confidence all the way to the faculty of Harvard Business School. “Fake it till you become it” is her rallying cry.

Ms. Cuddy’s research on stereotyping focused on how people’s snap judgments about warmth, competence and trustworthiness affect whom they date, hire, envy and disparage. She once wrote a Harvard Business Review article titled, “Just Because I’m Nice, Don’t Assume I’m Dumb.” More recent work considers what body language signals to our own brains.

She developed the idea for power posing in 2009 after hearing the former F.B.I. agent Joe Navarro describe how police investigators would sometimes make themselves feel imposing by using a bigger chair during interrogations. She decided to test the science behind it.

A paper that she wrote in 2010 with researchers Dana R. Carney and Andy J. Yap found that lab participants who spent two minutes in a room alone doing high-power poses (feet on the desk with fingers laced behind the head, let’s say) increased Testosterone levels by about 20 percent and lowered the stress hormone Cortisol by about 25 percent.

Numerous well-documented follow-up studies by other prominent scholars showed significant effects on behavior outcomes. In one, students assigned to adopt upright, open postures were more likely to pick seats at the front of a classroom and saw themselves as better leaders than their slouched counterparts. In another, baseball pitchers who evinced more submissive postures were perceived by competitors to be less competent.

Preliminary findings in a new study by Ms. Cuddy and Maarten Bos show that stretching out comfortably in a desk chair at a large monitor causes subjects to act far more assertively than those hunched up over tablets and smartphones.

To scroll through the email Ms. Cuddy has received since TED is to understand how much impact a simple idea, well delivered, can make: Nervous test-takers say they're now getting A's; coaches have turned "Bad News Bears" teams into champions.

Mac McGill watched Ms. Cuddy's talk in a homeless shelter in Santa Barbara, Calif., and started to "do the Wonder Woman" for two minutes every morning. On the way to a job interview, he "took over the whole bench" at a bus stop, helping him gain confidence, he said. Mr. McGill got the telemarketing gig ("a terrible job but it's work," he said) and continued with daily poses. "The first day after training, I made sales on two out of three calls — literally in my first 15 minutes," Mr. McGill said. "My boss told me he worked half a week before his first sale."

Ms. Cuddy has more than 20 fieldwork studies and collaborations in development. At the New York University Polytechnic School of Engineering, computer scientists at the Game Innovation Lab are developing video games to see if power posing before exams reduces math anxiety. Ms. Cuddy's team is collaborating with a Tufts Medical School professor to see whether the technique can prevent new surgeons from becoming too anxious and "choking" during ophthalmology procedures. An economist is assessing power posing as a tool to help impoverished women in Nairobi make better financial decisions.

Ms. Cuddy, who recently remarried, occasionally struggles to maintain the buoyancy she advises is merely a tweak away. When her TED Talk began going viral, she wanted to "go and hide," she said, particularly after her then 10-year-old son, Jonah, discovered nasty comments posted under her video. "I bet she made good money to say sit up straight," one said.

She told Jonah, "YouTube is now dead to us." But the trolls could not keep her down. "I don't care if some people view this research as stupid," she said. "I feel like it's my duty to share it." Her work never rests. Lately, she has been examining the differences between subjects who sleep sprawled out versus those who curl up. Early results show that people who arise with arms and legs extended feel brighter and more optimistic than the 40 percent who start the day in a fetal position.

But there's hope. "If you wake in fetal pose," Ms. Cuddy said, "open yourself up like the guy on the subway taking up too much space, and soon enough you'll feel like a happy warrior."