

Increasing Self-Awareness



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Increasing Self Awareness

A vital way of becoming more effective in both business and life is by becoming more self-aware. If you can become aware of your self – your strengths and your weaknesses – then, you can become aware of the affects you create. Only once you know your effects can you know how to change them, or even whether you should. Implementing the guidelines in this book is the first step in a continual process of deepening your awareness of yourself and the affects you create. Becoming more effective can only deepen your rewards in both your professional and personal life.

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In order to understand the world, one has to turn away from it on occasion.

Albert Camus

Preface

A vital way of becoming more effective in both business and life is by becoming more self-aware. If you can become aware of your self – your strengths and your weaknesses – then, you can become aware of the affects you create. Only once you know your effects can you know how to change them, or even whether you should. Implementing the guidelines in this book is the first step in a continual process of deepening your awareness of yourself and the affects you create. Becoming more effective can only deepen your rewards in both your professional and personal life.

What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Chapter One: What Is Self?

What is the self? To many, the answer might be so obvious that they haven't given it much thought. Others might proffer up one idea after another and finding each imperfect to an extent that they wonder if the self even exists, and if it does can it be defined. They may or may not realize that this is a question humanity has been asking for a millennium, with answers from different eras often addressing not just what we are but who we are at that particular place in time. Nor is the answer a trivial one. Too often we stumble through life and take a shallow view of ourselves, our environment, and prevailing forces. And yet, we can do better. We can be better. Our first step is to become aware of who and what we are.

Which still fails to answer the original question, what is the self? No answer will be completely accurate or at all times precise. Instead, here is a temporary answer, good for the purposes of this book: the self is the aspect of an individual organism that is aware of its existence as an individual organism. It's the part of ourselves that we are referring to when we each say "I," as in "I am thinking" or "I am feeling", etc. One helpful way to think about the self and become more aware of our complete and total self is to divide it into four aspects: the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual.

The Physical Self

This is probably the most obvious aspect of one's self, our physical bodies. Awareness of our bodies when that body is in great pain or distress is usually strong. But when we feel physically neutral or slightly good or bad, we can block our awareness of the physical body and replace it with other levels of awareness, awareness of our thoughts or our emotions, for instance. It is important to remember that each level of self affects the other levels of self. Feeling physically uncomfortable can lead to feeling emotionally uncomfortable, as well as feeling emotionally uncomfortable can lead to changes in our physical feelings.

At a certain point, examining one's physical self requires an examination of one's physical environment, such that what emerges is the recognition that the two mutually interact, change, and reinforce each other. This aspect of one's environment and one's self interacting with and changing each other is important to remember not only in examining the physical self and the physical environment, but at all levels of self-examination. Just as there is a physical environment that interacts with a physical self, there is a mental environment, emotional environment, and spiritual environment that interacts with each corresponding level of self. This will become vital to our understanding the concept of interdependency that comes up in a later chapter.

The Emotional Self

Being aware of oneself on an emotional level means being aware of one's emotions. In a culture that values concepts such as logic and reason, emotion often gets undervalued. When people become emotionally expressive others will tell them to calm down or to act rationally. Being emotional is thought of as being out of control. This might give you the idea that emotions are things to be avoided, but such a position would be harmful. Emotions serve an important purpose in providing the self with information about its environment as well as motivation for what to avoid or embrace in that environment.

Typically, when we speak of our bodies or of our emotions, we speak in terms of feeling or sensations, things that come upon us rather than things we create. This gives the impression of passivity. We are slaves to our physical and emotional needs. Rather than choosing how we feel, feelings hit us, and then, we react. The most important thing to remember is that we cannot avoid feeling emotions, but we can intervene and through our actions change how we react to our emotions and this can transform our future emotions in turn. Being able to identify how you feel in any given moment is an important goal of becoming more self-aware.

The Mental Self

The mental aspect of your self-concerns your thoughts and your imagination. Like the physical and emotional feelings, thoughts also have to capacity to come upon you without your control, but it is far easier to consciously change your thoughts, especially when you practice being more aware of them in

the first place. When people think, they often think in sentences or words, but just as often, they can think in images or words and phrases that act as a kind of shorthand. In these moments, it is quite easy for thoughts to get distorted and not accurately reflect a true situation.

The Spiritual Self

This book is not about any one religious belief, nor does it reject religious belief, either. The use of the term spirit here is not meant in a religious sense. Instead, the spiritual self is about your continuing sense of identity. The spiritual self is the realm of what a person values. It's the world view and the source of motivation. If the emotional self and mental self are about the feelings and thoughts of a person in a given moment, the spiritual self is about the interconnectedness of thoughts and feelings over time that forms into a sense of personal identity.

Practical Illustration

Michael was a college student working his way through by managing at a locally owned restaurant. Initially he would allow his employees to steal alcohol, which he justified to himself as not being a big deal because it was a small amount in the larger scheme of things. However he began to feel guilty about it after he went to the restaurant owners' home for a holiday he couldn't leave town for. When he saw that they too lived in near poverty, he began to feel guilty about allowing the alcohol theft. He made a list of demands for the rest of the employees to sign, including an agreement to not participate in any more alcohol theft. Arnold, an employee there, met with coworkers who were also employees to discuss the situation about what to about Michael and his mean and snarky letter. Arnold ended up picking an argument with Michael during a particularly stressful time at work. The argument got heated and Michael lost his cool and pushed Arnold. Michael resigned as a manager the next day, and Arnold was promoted in his place, because the owners, who didn't actually see the situation, believed that Arnold had kept his cool and demonstrated leadership when Michael had not.

The body never lies.

Martha Graham

Chapter Two: Awareness of the Physical Self

Even though we live inside physical bodies, so to speak, it's not uncommon to proceed day in and day out without ever truly being aware of one's body. Unless we are experiencing high degrees of pain or physical stress, how our bodies feel at any given moment can completely escape our notice. However, an increased awareness of your physical body is the first step in improving both your physical and emotional health. Even though it is a first step, the importance of being aware of your physical self and the space it operates can't be understated.

Scanning

One of the best ways to develop a habit of being physically aware comes from mindfulness meditation and the specific practice of scanning. This practice allows you to focus your attention throughout your body and take note of how things stand. Since we often make stressful situations worse by holding tension in our muscles, practicing this method can make you aware, even in the midst of stress, of where this tension might be hiding and intensifying things.

Progressive Relaxation

While scanning can be an effective tool in becoming more aware of one's physical self, a variation on this technique can actually improve one's ability to relax. This technique is called progressive relaxation. It's identical in process to scanning except that when you place your focus on a specific part of your body, you also tense up all the muscles in that area for 2-3 seconds, as you take deep breaths, and then you release the muscles. By tensing and releasing your muscles, you actually release any muscular tension that you were holding in your muscles before performing this technique. Progressive relaxation is a prelude to another technique called a relaxation response. This technique allows a person to immediately initiate a feeling of relaxation in the body without having to lie down or meditate. The Relaxation Response is achieved by consciously tensing all the muscles in your body at once as you inhale, and then relaxing all of your muscles together as you exhale.

While the relaxation response can be supremely helpful when you find yourself in a stressful situation, and progressive relaxation is immensely helpful when you can't fall asleep in bed, among other uses of the technique, consciously tensing one's muscles is not healthy for everyone to practice. If you have TMD, a condition where you grind your teeth frequently, tensing the jaw muscles could actually be detrimental. The same applies if you have various types of physical injuries where the muscles around the injured body part are already tense and increasing tension can have negative results. If you are unsure of whether you should practice progressive relaxation or the relaxation response, you should probably consult with your doctor or stick to scanning as a method of increasing physical awareness and relaxation.

Physical Stressors

As you become more physically aware, you should also become more aware of physical elements that create stress in your life. These can be varied and can have as much to do with what is outside your body as what you put into your body. Smoking, losing sleep, eating unhealthily, or setting up your work space non-ergonomically are just a few examples of physical stressors. While stress is an inevitable consequence of being alive, you can reduce stress in your life both by eliminating elements that cause you stress and developing strategies that reduce your physical stress.

Exercise

When you exercise regularly, you can improve yourself in many ways. Exercise helps your brain to stimulate positive emotions and eliminate low-arousal emotions such as disappointment or depression. Exercise improves your physical health, your energy level, and it reduces physical stress. A good exercise program focuses on improving your body in four areas:

- **Balance.** Exercises such as Tai Chi, martial arts, yoga, and gymnastics all help you to improve your physical balance (and by extension your mental, emotional, and spiritual balance as well).
- **Endurance.** Exercises such as running, swimming, cycling, or aerobics help you to improve your endurance. Improved endurance means you can function better for longer periods of time.
- **Strength.** Weight training is the best way to improve your strength. You can use free weights (don't forget to have a spotter), weight machines, kettle bells, or resistance bands. Remember the greater the weight you lift, the more muscle mass you can build. The more repetitions you do, the more toned and defined your muscles become. One way to combine endurance and weight training is to circuit train. This means that instead of doing three sets of reps at each station with 30 seconds to a minute to recover, you do one set and move on in a circuit with no rest between sets. Repeat the circuit three times.
- **Flexibility.** Stretching is vital to a good exercise regimen. Not only does this improve your flexibility, but practicing yoga, Pilates, or other types of stretching exercises also eliminates toxins in your body that create stress and discomfort, and stretching also prevents injuries.

Even though we hear it all the time and know deep down that exercising is good for us, it remains difficult to put into practice and to keep it up. Here are some suggestions to help you maintain a consistent exercise regimen:

- Try to exercise at the same time each day, and avoid exercise three hours before you go to sleep.

- Find a workout partner. This can help you when you aren't feeling as motivated, and you can help your partner when they aren't motivated to stick with it.
- Never exercise beyond your physical capabilities. When you initially begin exercising, you might experience muscle soreness. This ache is a different feeling than a muscle tear, which will be a sharper and more pronounced pain. There is the saying, "No pain, no gain," but you must differentiate between the hurt of improving yourself physically and the pain of injury.
- Drink plenty of water and eat a balanced diet with lots of vitamins. If you experience muscle soreness that lasts for more than a few days, you might not be getting enough vitamin C. Especially if your exercise regimen involves stretching, you need to drink plenty of water to flush the stress-producing toxins from your body.
- Vary up your exercise regimen from time to time. This accomplishes two things: it prevents your body from getting used to an exercise so that the positive changes are decreased (known as plateauing), and changing up your regimen keeps the exercises from becoming boring. Make sure that your new exercises continue to improve your physical self in each of the four areas: balance, strength, flexibility, and endurance.

Practical Illustration

Tana worked at a job where she sat all day. She also liked to eat sweets and tended to avoid exercise because, she would tell herself, she didn't have the energy. Her friend Chandra also worked at the same job, but counteracted the fact that she sat all day by exercising regularly and limiting what foods she ate. One day Tana began having pains in her side, which the doctors diagnosed as a result of her sitting. She grew upset and depressed because they told her she would likely contract diabetes if this didn't change soon. Chandra saw her friend crying at her desk one day and invited her to join Chandra after work so they could work out and Tana could talk about it. At first the idea of working out was unattractive, but Tana really needed to talk to someone, so she went along. After her work out, Tana actually felt more energized than she had in a while and even felt optimistic about her future.

Procrastination is the thief of time.

Edward Young

Chapter Three: Time Management

Another way of thinking of physical awareness is being aware of how you deploy yourself in your environment. This can be your work environment, your home environment, and any other environment in which you are engaged. Life in the early 21st Century is fast-paced and in order to effectively engage with the overall environment, you must become aware of how you spend your time and how to maximize that time.

Organization

One important aspect of time management is getting organized. If you constantly have to spend time finding things or apologize for missing important events, chances are you are disorganized. One first step to becoming organized is to organize your physical space. For those of us who are messy, creative types, this can be daunting. Maybe you have let a small mess pile up into a big one, but if you break the task into smaller tasks and tackle these in turn, it can seem far less daunting. Taking the time to clean up is well worth it because it saves you time and makes you feel less stressed over the long run. Remaining organized requires continuous maintenance, but if you keep to it, then small jobs never get an opportunity to snowball into humongous ones. Before you leave your workplace, making sure everything is tidy is one way to avoid things piling up. Another step is to designate a time to clean on a weekly basis.

In addition to organizing your space, to truly become adept at organizing your time, you must first understand how you use your time normally without any intervention. One way to do this is to write down how you spent each hour of your day before you go to sleep. Do this for a week and it will become clear which areas in your life are being managed inefficiently. Keep in mind that there are varying degrees of managing your time. Some people use lists or sticky notes to remind themselves of what needs to be done. Others use day-planners and schedule every moment of their lives in a calendar.

Goal Management

If you consider improving your time management as a process, then one of the big aspects of that process is to set goals. When you break down a large task into smaller tasks you are engaged in goal setting behavior even if on a small scale. In order to be effective at setting and reaching goals, it is helpful to use the S.M.A.R.T. acronym:

- **Specific.** When you establish a specific goal rather than a general one, you are far more likely to follow through.
- **Measurable.** One of the reasons for making a goal specific is so you can measure what the successful completion of that goal looks like.

- **Achievable.** If a goal is too easy, it can also be easy to justify giving up on it because it's not important enough. Make sure you set goals that are challenging but achievable.
- **Realistic.** While being ambitious can help you to achieve large goals, being too ambitious can often lead to rebellion. If your goal is something nearly impossible, such as piloting a spaceship to Neptune, you will have several opportunities to give up.
- **Time-targeted.** When you decide on setting a goal, you must also decide on when you expect to achieve that goal. You must be specific. This allows you to organize your goal-achieving behavior with a deadline.

In addition to being SMART about goal setting, there are some other steps you can take that will help you remain committed to achieving your goal.

- Tell someone else about your goal. This will help to keep you accountable and committed.
- When appropriate, divide your goal into smaller milestones. When you reach a milestone, reward yourself. Small rewards can help you to stay enthusiastic.
- If you fail to meet a milestone, don't use this as an occasion to beat yourself up or to give up. Instead, determine where and how you failed and how to avoid doing so in the future. Most importantly, don't give up.
- Perhaps the single most important step is to choose a goal that is meaningful to you.

Priorities

When you have clear goals, it becomes easier to set priorities. No matter how simple or complicated a task, anything worth accomplishing won't happen all at once. When you begin to manage your time effectively, you must be able to prioritize. One important thing that tends to slip through the cracks when it comes to prioritization is scheduling time to have fun and relax. In order to be effective and creative, you need time to unwind and time to play. Here are three different strategies for prioritizing your tasks:

- **Eat a Frog.** This first suggestion comes from a book of the same title by Brian Tracy. Essentially, this means that at the beginning of each day, you pick the hardest, most tedious task to do first. Whatever task you have before you that is the one you're looking forward to the least, do that one first. When you go with this method of prioritizing, keep in mind that over-planning or trying to get yourself enthused over it are often subtle ways to procrastinate. Instead, just dig in and eat that frog.
- **Big Stuff First.** Before you go to sleep, write down the three most important things you need to get done by the end of tomorrow. Keep the list beside your bed, so that when you wake in the morning, it's there as a reminder. Once you complete your big tasks, you can then spend time on smaller ones.
- **Covey Quadrants.** Self-help guru Stephen Covey advises that you organize your priorities with the assistance of a sheet of paper that you divide into four quadrants: Q1 stands for important and urgent tasks such as crises; Q2 stands for important but not urgent tasks, the types of things you need to do, but they have less rigid or approaching deadlines; Q3 stands for unimportant, but urgent tasks, things such as answering the phone or going to a meeting; Q4 stands for unimportant and non-urgent tasks, the types of things you feel better about doing once the more pressing work is done. According to Covey, it's inevitable that you will have to spend time working on Q1 tasks, but the more adept you become at managing your time the more you will be able to spend on Q2 tasks. While it's important to take time to play, a Q4 task usually, it's best to engage in Q3 and Q4 tasks when you have already handled the others.

Procrastination

The biggest bugbear to managing your time well is procrastination. Often we procrastinate when we are faced with a task that we perceive as difficult or unpleasant. Another circumstance that lends itself to procrastination is when the reward for a completed task is delayed. If we know that upon finishing a difficult task we will get an immediate promotion, it motivates us more so than if that promotion will occur at a later point. Procrastination functions as an impulse towards feeling good immediately, and according to psychologists, it originates from a time when human activities were more immediate and involved less planning. Many great strategies for fighting procrastination have been listed previously,

such as breaking a large task into a bunch of small tasks or organizing your work area and keeping it clutter free. Other strategies will be addressed in future chapters, such as mindfulness meditation as a method for strengthening your will. Here are some additional strategies:

- **Eliminate distractions.** Playing on Facebook or checking your email are two common ways in which you can procrastinate. By eliminating the temptation, you eliminate the possibility of giving into an impulse. It's not enough to simply have the page minimized on your computer desktop. You may have to close your email program or your browser, or disconnect from the internet altogether. If talking or texting on your cell phone is a way that you procrastinate, then turn it off when you have a task to perform. You can turn it back on and check your messages as a reward for finishing your task. When organizing your work space, make sure that you have eliminated the types of things that you might use in order to procrastinate.
- **Use the buddy system.** Having someone who is aware of the tasks you have laid out in front of you and who has tasks themselves can be helpful for holding each other accountable. Take care not to let your updates and check-ins with your buddy become occasions for procrastination themselves.
- **Accept that things are likely to be imperfect.** Our tendency to strive for perfection often results in feelings of anxiety over the fact that we might not get it right, and such emotions are great breeding grounds for procrastination.
- **Avoid overcomplicating matters.** While this might look as if you are breaking a large task into smaller tasks, each with their individual deadlines, spending too much time organizing can quickly become an exercise in avoiding the task at hand.
- **Keep in mind that our tendency is to overestimate the amount of time that a task will take.** This overestimation makes it easier to justify procrastination. When you find yourself thinking that you have plenty of time to complete a task, remind yourself that you are probably exaggerating.
- **Try setting a timer for twenty five minutes.** During that time you will do nothing but the task at hand. This can be helpful for two reasons: it's easier to use willpower for short periods of time such as a 25 minute limit, and some work will create its own momentum where you won't want to stop after the 25 minutes are up. If taking a lot of breaks is part of your procrastination game, this technique isn't the best, but if you have problems getting started, this can be quite helpful.

Practical Illustration

Jennifer had goals and ideas, but she found herself constantly procrastinating. She would become momentarily distracted only to find herself looking at the clock to see 20 minutes had passed since she looked away from the task at hand. Jennifer approached Aisha, her mentor, for advice on how to stop procrastinating. Aisha had a reputation at work as a dynamo who got things done, so she seemed the perfect person for Jennifer to speak with about this problem. Aisha looked at Jennifer's work space and suggested that Jennifer remove the clutter from her workspace. Jennifer took Aisha's advice and organized her office so that everything had a place. She removed some of the toys and gadgets that she found distracting. She did keep a motivational poster, but everything else in the office was work related. The first week was difficult, but Jennifer was able to see progress after a while. Soon, she was spurred on by her own success.

The touchstone of validity is my own experience.

Carl Rogers

Chapter Four: The Emotional Self

The emotional aspect of the self has long been misunderstood. The ancient cultures from which many of our own contemporary values have derived were faced with a difficult task. With the advent of agriculture, for the first time in human history, people did not have to wander and had food surpluses that went beyond the immediate moment. As a result, you suddenly had large groups of people living near each other. In order to limit the destructive impulses that tended to come out when large groups gathered, people began to champion concepts of reason and rationality. In doing so, they suggested that emotions themselves might be undesirable, or that acknowledging emotions is a sign of weakness. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Validity of Emotions

You might have heard it said that all emotions are valid, but what exactly does this mean? Does this mean that any time you feel an emotion you are perfectly justified in feeling an emotion? For example, if your child spills a glass of milk, does the validity of emotions mean you are correct in being angry with your child? Perhaps the notion of correct versus incorrect is the wrong approach. The validity of emotions means that in any situation, if you feel anger, regardless of the cause, it is valid to acknowledge to yourself that you do indeed feel anger. The validity of emotions means that denying an emotional state is a dangerous action that can have big consequences, often resulting in an emotional breakdown in the future if not addressed.

Utility of Emotions

Before human beings established cities and civilization, life was, in the words of Thomas Hobbes, “mean, nasty, brutish, and short.” At any moment a person could find his or herself in mortal danger. In this type of environment, the ability to feel fear served a purpose that was often the difference between life and death. If you felt fear, your sympathetic nervous system could stimulate your adrenal glands and you would feel the impulse to run away or fight. With adrenaline coursing through your system, you could approach the situation as if it was the life and death situation it actually was more often than not. Of course, nowadays, we might feel as if a situation is a matter of life or death when upon further reflection we realize it isn’t. Nevertheless, when we feel emotions they provide us with important information about both our environment and, more importantly, our assessment of that environment.

Emotional Arousal

In order to make the best use of our emotions, it becomes important to be able to identify how we feel at any given moment. Psychologists have developed the theory of emotional granularity to help us with just that. According to this theory, emotions can be identified by two different primary characteristics: the level to which they excite us, known as arousal; and the degree to which we experience them as

pleasant or unpleasant, known as valence. Emotions that are characterized as having high arousal would be emotions such as joy, anger, enthusiasm, and anxiety. Low arousal emotions would include depression but also calm. If your thoughts tend to race, along with your pulse, you are probably feeling an emotion or group of emotions that are characterized by high levels of arousal.

Emotional Valence

Emotional valence refers to whether the emotion is experienced as a pleasant condition or an unpleasant condition. Emotions that are unpleasant tend to indicate that something needs to change – either in ourselves or in our environment. Emotions that are on the pleasant side of the valence scale indicate that whatever is happening works for us. When you are having a good time, you are experiencing emotions on the pleasurable side of the valence continuum.

Practical Illustration

Aria and Sally's father had recently lost his job as a government worker. Both sisters recognized that this created anxiety within them. Aria, who enjoyed being active and athletic, vented her frustrations out against Sally because she couldn't understand why Sally liked makeup, sewing, and telling stories. Sally realized that her frustration wasn't with Aria despite their arguments, and instead of arguing back, Sally started looking through the classifieds to try and find another job for her father. She soon found a possibility for him, but he would have to move north and work in a prison.

The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts.

Marcus Antonius

Chapter Five: Mood Management

If you cannot control how you feel and avoiding your feelings has negative consequences, the only resource you have left is to manage your emotions. This involves understanding not only how you feel, but what use you can make of your emotions.

Emotional Intelligence

Like the emotional granularity theory, the theory of emotional intelligence is one that helps you to understand how to make the most use of your feelings. Once you accept that emotions are valid, it's tempting to think that expressing them in every instance is the way to go. Like the famous gag in the television show *Seinfeld*, to indicate your anger or frustration, you could go around screaming, "Serenity now!" Unfortunately that's not what is called for when you accept the validity of your emotions. Emotional intelligence means understanding what your emotion signifies and the appropriate and helpful ways in which you make the emotion work for you.

Categories of Emotion

One useful way of thinking about emotions is to divide them into categories based on how they help us to perform. We could assign one category for emotions that always help us to perform well. Emotions such as enthusiasm, confidence, tenacity, and optimism would fall into this category of high performance emotions. These high performance emotions are characterized as being high arousal emotions and as being emotions where our focus is wide and open.

Another category of emotions becomes obvious. If we have a category for high performance emotions, then it follows that we should have a category for emotions that always interfere with high performance. These are called blue emotions, and they include such emotions as dejection, depression, boredom, and disappointment. These emotions are marked by qualities of low arousal and a narrowed and closed focus.

A third category for emotions would cover those emotions that can either improve our performance or impede it. These emotions include anger, anxiety, and frustration, and they are called swing emotions because they can swing either way into motivating better performance or interfering with good performance. Take anxiety for example. If someone preparing for a test was to feel anxious about that test, this could lead either to that person studying harder or freezing up. If the anxiety led to more studying, we could say that the emotion caused the person's behavior to swing into the realm of high performance. If the anxiety made the person freeze up, than obviously, that person probably did not do too well on the test, and the effects of that emotion led to decreased performance as if the emotion were a blue emotion. Swing emotions are characterized as being high arousal emotions but with a narrowed focus.

A fourth category of emotions does not get discussed much because we often don't recognize emotions in this category as emotions, seeing them more as neutral states. However, low arousal and wide focused emotions such as calm and satisfaction can be high performance emotions as well.

Increasing Arousal

If you've ever felt depressed, you can probably understand why raising your arousal level might be a helpful way to go. The trick to emotional intelligence, then, is to recognize how you are feeling and determine what needs to be done in order to feel a different way. Fortunately, in the case of blue emotions, there are numerous ways to increase your arousal levels and thereby put your emotions into more of the high performance category where you're feeling enthusiasm or optimism. Here are some suggestions:

- **Exercise.** For those suffering from depression, doctors often recommend exercising. The combination of movement and high respiration helps to stimulate chemicals in your brain that give you the sense of well-being (what runners refer to as "runner's high") and to increase your energy level.
- **Listen to upbeat music.** A steady beat has the capacity to pump a person up and get them feeling greater levels of enthusiasm. Often upbeat music can lead people to spontaneously engage in a truly excellent form of exercise: dancing.
- **Sing.** While it might sound hokey, singing with all your heart can really (to quote the Beatles) "take a sad song and make it better." Not only is the physical act of singing a kind of massage for your lungs and throat, but the movement of air through your vocal chords in the form of vibrations can arouse your energy levels.
- **Play.** One really great way to cope with blue emotions is to engage in some form of game. Playing taps into our inner child and reawakens our sense of optimism and enthusiasm.

Decreasing Arousal

While increasing your arousal level can be an excellent way to effectively deal with low arousal emotions, feeling high levels of emotional arousal is not always helpful. The key is to understand the valence of the high arousal emotion. If it is on the pleasant side of the spectrum, there's no need to change anything, but if you're emotion is unpleasant, then you probably need to lower your arousal level. In the example before about anxiety and test taking, too much arousal could make a person freeze up. This is why when someone feels anxious or angry, it's common for another person to tell them to calm down. Unfortunately, while this may be obvious from a rational standpoint, it's easier said than done when you do feel angry or anxious. Since swing emotions tend to feature both instances of high arousal and a narrowed focus, activities that can lower the arousal level, widen the focus, or both are

desirable. A lower level of arousal allows you to reassess your situation and a wider focus allows you to explore possibilities that wouldn't have occurred to you in a state of anger or frustration. Here are some suggestions:

- **Breathe.** Taking deep and slow breaths helps to slow down your respiration and allow the fight or flight feelings to subside.
- **Engage a Relaxation Response.** If you've been practicing the technique introduced in chapter two regularly, this might even be an instinctive action. If you have the capability and space, taking the time to meditate can also help to reduce your feelings of arousal.
- **Exercise.** Strangely enough, exercise can increase arousal levels in people who are feeling low arousal and it can also decrease the arousal level of someone feeling high arousal. This is a form of venting. In fact anything that is a high energy activity can help vent your high arousal levels and reduce them to something more manageable. That's why people tend to shout when they get angry.
- **Shout.** Obviously, you need to be selective in how you deploy this strategy. Shouting at your boss, friend, parent, or child might help in the immediate moment to reduce your arousal level, but it often comes with consequences. However, finding a private and quiet place to scream your lungs out can be quite helpful.

Practical Illustration

Kyle had been feeling depressed and lethargic ever since his girlfriend left him. Consequently, he had begun to isolate, and even his best friend Luke had not seen him for a few weeks. Luke had a particularly bad day at work, and he decided that the best way to deal with the excess energy of his frustration and anger would be to go jogging. As he was jogging, he passed Kyle's house, saw that a light was on, and invited Kyle to join him for the rest of his run. He actually had to drag Kyle out of his bed, but once the two ran together, they both felt better. Kyle felt more energized than he had felt in weeks, and Luke worked out his excess energy so that he could reflect upon what needed to change at his work.

We are addicted to our thoughts. We cannot change anything if we cannot change our thinking.

Santosh Kalwar

Chapter Six: The Mental Self

Strictly speaking, it is not possible to control your emotions. However, your thought processes often determine how you assess a situation, and it's that assessment where emotions can come into play. If your assessment is off, you may be angry in a situation that when viewed in another way would not warrant anger at all, for example. Consequently, in developing greater self-awareness, you must become aware of your mental self.

Thinking Style

One aspect of awareness of your mental self is being aware of your thinking style. Psychologists differentiate between two types of thinking styles: global and linear. Neither thinking style is inherently better than the other, however. These terms merely describe ways in which people process information. Global thinkers tend to be big picture thinkers. They're more interested in the theory or concept behind something than they are in the minute details. Conversely, linear thinkers are more interested in the details than in the big picture. A linear thinker will tend to prefer step by step processes for doing things, rather than an overarching theory about them. One way to think about the differences between global thinking and linear thinking is to imagine you are given a toy that is in pieces and needs to be assembled. If you are a global thinker, you will be more likely to look at the picture of what the assembled toy looks like and attempt to put it together based on this picture. If you are a linear thinker, you will more likely proceed through the instructions step by step. While neither approach is wrong, in group projects, global thinkers tend to work well with and prefer working with other global thinkers, whereas linear thinkers prefer to work with other linear thinkers.

Learning Style

Another aspect of the mental self is the learning style. The learning style is how you take in and process new information. There are three learning styles, and understanding which one you are can help you improve your ability to learn new information by maximizing aspects of your preferred approach. Here are the three learning styles:

- **Auditory.** People who learn best by listening prefer lectures to visual displays or physical activities. If you are an auditory learner, one way to improve your learning is to record lectures so that you can play them back for review.
- **Visual.** For visual learners, a picture is worth a thousand words. They prefer power point presentations to lectures. They also prefer to read information than to have it told to them.

- **Tactile.** If you're a tactile learner, this means that you learn by doing. Rather than have someone explain to you how to effectively work that chainsaw, you need to do it yourself.

When considering both thinking and learning styles, it is important to remember that these are not discrete categories. A person can be primarily a tactile learner, but also exhibit qualities of visual or auditory learning. Likewise, a global thinker can also have linear thinking traits and vice versa.

Personality

Before discussing personality, it is important to understand something. None of this stuff actually exists. There is no such thing as the self, thinking styles, learning styles, or for that matter, the personality. Or at least there is no biological basis for any of these things. If you examine a person's brain with an MRI or PET scan, you would be hard pressed to locate where in the brain the notion of "I" comes from. Similarly, a person with a holistic thinking style or a visual learning style won't have any special features in their brains that differentiate them from a linear thinker or a different learning style. Psychology has a term for all of these things: constructs. So if constructs are not real, why do we study them?

A good analogy comes from mathematics. Although triangles and circles do not exist in the actual world, understanding the properties of these can allow you to do things in the real world that you wouldn't necessarily be able to do. For example, triangulation allows you to use knowledge about the angles of triangles and the relations of these to each other to determine the location of an otherwise unknown point. Similarly, using psychological constructs allows us to think of activities, such as learning or working together in groups, in a certain way that we wouldn't get to without these constructs. For example, it's not as important whether you are officially a tactile learner than it is that you find learning with your hands an easier or more effective process than other approaches.

Distorted Thinking

To this point, we've explored various styles of thinking, learning, and personality expression. However, what happens when thinking goes bad? There are numerous examples of distorted thinking that give us an inaccurate assessment of our situation. Distorted thinking comes into play typically when we have narrowed our focus on things. Whether the emotion is of the high or low arousal variety, if its valence is on the unpleasant side, it typically has distorted patterns of thinking that go with it. Here are some examples of distorted thinking patterns:

- **Magnifying and Minimizing.** When a person magnifies a situation, they are said to be making a mountain out of a molehill. Magnification involves exaggerating the extent of a problem or choosing the worst set of outcomes as the most likely outcome. Minimizing is the opposite. When you minimize you blow off something as being less important than it truly is.
- **Thinking in the imperative.** When you think in imperatives, you fixate on how you think a person or situation ought to be rather than how it is. This often takes you into areas of a situation for which you have no control.
- **Dichotomous Reasoning.** This distorted thinking style involves thinking in black and white, either/or, or hyperbolic terms. Frequently there is an in between that the thinker is discounting.
- **Destructive Labeling.** If you have ever thought to yourself "this is stupid" or "my child is a brat" you are engaged in destructive labeling. While your thought may have some merit, it is a generalized statement that labels a person or situation in an unhelpful way.
- **Personalizing.** When you personalize something, you assume that whatever is happening is about you. If a co-worker is frowning, it's obviously because of something you did, according to this distorted thinking pattern.

When you engage in distorted thinking, you can frequently frame a situation inaccurately or in ways that perpetuate a conflict rather than de-escalating it. Typically when our emotions are unpleasant, our thoughts race and become shortened into key words or phrases. This allows illogical notions to thrive. Here are some approaches to countering distorted thoughts:

- Rephrase a thought into a complete sentence. For example, instead of thinking "loser!" you may rephrase that into "if I don't pass this test, I am going to turn out to be a loser." Once you have rephrased the thought into a complete sentence, the nature of the distortion becomes more evident (in this example, magnification).
- Counter your distorted thought with a question or a statement that clarifies your reasoning. For example, if you notice you are magnifying, ask yourself if it is really that bad, or how likely will that worst case scenario come to pass. If you are engaged in destructive labeling, ask yourself for specifics. If you think your boss is stupid, try to identify what specific behavior or situation makes you think this.

- Try this rule of thumb for expanding your focus and reframing the problem: The real problem is not _____; the real problem is _____. This allows you the possibility of finding alternative solutions to a problem that might under other circumstances seem unsolvable.
- Write down your thoughts in a journal. When you have all sorts of negative thoughts tying your brain in knots, keeping a journal is a surefire way to untangle all those knots.

Practical Illustration

Shana didn't always enjoy socializing with others because she would frequently feel drained afterwards. In fact, she often preferred to stay at home with a couple of glasses of wine and a good book. Her friend Martha was the life of the party and often invited Shana to go out. Shana would feel guilty for declining the invitation most of the time. One day, Shana took a personality test and realized that she was an introvert. Understanding this about herself, she felt less guilty about declining Martha's invitations. Shana also made a point to schedule more alone time for herself, and she gradually found that she had more energy to accept Martha's invitations more frequently.

The thing that's important to know is that you never know. You're always sort of feeling your way.

Diane Arbus

Chapter Seven: Interpersonal Awareness

As you develop a greater degree of self-awareness, you will also become more aware of the dynamics at play in your interactions with others. However, this awareness doesn't always go two-ways. When you have a greater awareness of thinking, learning, and personality styles, you also have a responsibility to be more adaptable in your interactions with others.

Addressing Different Thinking Styles

People who share the same thinking styles often have no problems working together. If both people are global thinkers then they will appreciate each other's willingness to see the bigger picture. However when one person thinks differently from another, this different thinking style can not only seem foreign but irrelevant. However, these differences in thinking styles can, with the right approach, complement each other. While you may be aware of your thinking style, the people you interact with might not be as aware of theirs. A subtle way of intervening is to try to accommodate different styles of thinking when you interact with others. If you are a global thinker and find yourself at odds with someone who doesn't understand why you can't just give them a specific step by step plan, this is your opportunity to step beyond your limitations and try a more linear thinking style.

Addressing Different Learning Styles

One side effect of deepening your own self-awareness is that you might often find yourself in a position of leadership where you have to teach others or give presentations, which is a kind of teaching when you consider it. If you are an auditory learner, take steps to design presentations and seminars that accommodate other types of learning. Use power-point and other visual aids to help visual learners, and find activities that allow tactile learners an opportunity to learn by doing, even as you accommodate your own auditory learning style through spoken instructions and explanations. One way to make sure you are accommodating the different learning styles is to video record your presentations before when you practice and during the presentation itself. This way you can study for areas where you are strong and for areas where you can improve.

Active Listening and Body Language

Another important factor in being aware of your interactions with others is being able to listen and to truly hear others. Employing the techniques of active listening can help, but these are not simply tricks. In order to be effective with others, you must be truly interested in their point of view. Here are some important suggestions for how to listen more actively:

- **Use (minimal) encouragers.** Encouragers are short words or phrases that indicate to a speaker that you are paying attention to what they are saying and encouraging them to continue. These are words, phrases, and sounds such as *Yes, Uh huh, Go on, Mmm, So what happened next?* Etc.
- **Repeat key phrases.** This is another way to encourage the speaker to continue and to make them feel heard. Here's an example: the speaker says, "Yesterday, I went to the store to buy a loaf of bread." The listener can combine a repetition of a key phrase with an encourager, "A loaf of bread. Okay, go on."
- **Paraphrase and summarize the speaker's key points.** *So what I'm hearing you say is ...*
- **Offer empathy when appropriate.** *That must have been really tough or I can see why you would be angry.*
- **Stay in the moment and listen fully.** It might be tempting to interrupt because you've anticipated what else the other person is going to say, but regardless of your level of certitude, it's often just as important for the other person to articulate their thought. This is one reason why interruptions can be so frustrating, because through speaking we often find our own way of understanding a situation.
- **Listening fully** also involves taking note of volume and tone of voice and pace of speech. These indicate the emotional state of speaker. Higher volume, tone, and pace indicate an arousal emotion, enthusiasm, perhaps, but also anger, frustration, or anxiety. Context matters.

- **Probe with open ended questions.** Open ended questions are the opposite of close-ended questions, which can be answered in a single word or a few words. For example, *Were you able to login?* (close ended question with a yes/no answer) vs *When you entered your username and password and hit enter, what did the screen show?* (open ended question with a more involved answer).

In addition to being aware of a person's speech, you also need to be aware of both their body language and your own. Typically, when there is a discrepancy between the words that are said and a person's tone and body language, the latter will more accurately reflect the circumstances. Here are some things to consider regarding a person's body language:

- **Eye contact.** People who make greater eye contact will tend to appear more trustworthy. However, too much eye contact can come across as aggressive. Strive to make eye contact in your conversations around 60% of the time.
- **Posture.** When a person is being attentive, they will sit up straight while leaning slightly forward. Less engaged people will tend to slouch and lean away from a speaker.
- **Facial expressions.** It is said that a smile can be contagious. In fact, most facial expressions can evoke a similar response in another person. If you frown, another person might also feel tempted to frown. This is called mirroring. You can use mirroring to help establish a rapport with another person. By mirroring the other person's own positive expressions, you hasten the connection process with that person. Conversely, you can also create a positive frame to an interaction by smiling yourself and avoiding expressions of negativity.
- **One powerful aspect of active listening is the use of non-verbal encouragers.** Nodding your head or using a facial expression to communicate empathy are two examples. For example if someone was telling you a story about a big mistake they had made, a face palm on your part can not only communicate that you are paying attention, but that you are emotionally engaged as well.

Transactional Analysis

Transactional analysis is a way of interacting with others where you can recognize certain behavioral patterns in another person and by adjusting your behavior you can induce a change in the other person's as well. Transactional analysis identifies three separate modes of behavior when interacting with someone else:

- **Child mode.** Child mode is the type of behavior that places an emphasis on fun and tries to avoid responsibility. Statements such as "stop being such a priss" or "you're really bringing me down" and variations on them are examples of child mode behavior. Another example would

occur if you told your teenager to get off of his or her cell phone and your teenager rolled his or her eyes at you.

- **Parent mode.** This mode of behavior occurs when someone is acting in the same manner as authority figures acted in their lives during childhood development. It can take on many forms of expression, but typically communicates an “I’m more mature than you” attitude. Statements such as “Why do you never listen?” or “Can’t you just be a grownup for once in your life?” are examples of people behaving in parent mode. If you have ever experienced someone speaking to you condescendingly as if you were their child, you probably experienced someone acting in parent mode.
- **Adult mode.** The preferred mode of behavior for social interactions is neither child nor parent modes but adult mode instead. Rather than focusing on the way things should be, as the Parent mode does, or the way you want things to be, as the Child mode does, the Adult mode focuses on the way things are and how to adapt oneself to them.

These modes of behavior tend to slip into a recurring cycle of complementary modes. Parent mode behavior in one person will continue so long as the other person is responding in the complementary child mode, and vice versa. In order to break this cycle of behavior, one person has to consciously refuse to remain in the complementary mode. For example, if a boss says to you, “Where’s my report? What is this, playtime?” this is an example of parent-mode behavior and if you respond with the complementary child-mode behavior, then a vicious cycle of parent-child responses ensue, which can rapidly escalate into conflict. However, if you remain in adult mode, you create what’s called a crossed transaction. The crossed transaction interrupts the vicious cycle and makes it difficult for the other person to remain in their respective adult or child mode. It de-escalates a situation and prevents conflict by giving the other person an opportunity to complement your adult mode behavior with adult mode behavior themselves.

Practical Illustration

Grace and Priscilla teamed up to work on a project. Since this project involved extensive research, the two women split their labor. Grace, a global thinker, decided to look at the more theoretical information, while Priscilla, a linear thinker, looked at instances where theory had been put into practice. The two were well aware of each other’s thinking styles because in conversations, Priscilla had noted that Grace tended to speak in abstract and theoretical terms and pointed out that tendency to Grace, who was herself aware of the theory on the differences between thinking styles. When it came time to share their information, Grace created a power point demonstration because she knew that Priscilla was a visual learner, whereas Priscilla, appreciating Grace’s comfort with auditory learning, verbally explained the results of her research. Because of their differences in thinking and learning styles, and their awareness of these, they were able to put together a presentation that played to both of their strengths and really wowed those present by its thoroughness.

There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.

Maya Angelou

Chapter Eight: The Spiritual Self

Developing awareness of the spiritual self is the capstone to developing awareness of one's whole self. When you begin to focus on spiritual development, all other approaches to increasing your self-awareness become enhanced because frequently a key step to becoming more aware of your body, heart, and mind involves paying attention to the needs of your soul.

Mindfulness

While mindfulness began as a Buddhist concept, it has since been developed as a practice in psychology that has helped numerous people deal with crippling anxiety, depression, drug addiction, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Being mindful is not simply living in the present but a way of concentrating on aspects of the present moment you normally take for granted. Buddhists use the term "monkey mind" to describe how our brains tend to barrage us with thoughts about the past, the present, and the future constantly. Becoming mindful means to become both aware of the movement of your thoughts and emotions and to become detached from them. This detachment allows you to focus through your true self rather than seeing yourself as thoughts thinking or emotions feeling. Practicing mindfulness meditation is the first step towards becoming mindful throughout every moment of your life.

Meditation

Mindfulness meditation is actually only one form of meditation with the specific goal of developing a specific type of meditation. There are other methods of meditation that have other goals. In fact, the progressive relaxation technique you learned in chapter two is another meditation technique with the goal of deepening your feelings of relaxation. Another type of meditation called a loving-kindness meditation is designed to stimulate positive feelings in yourself and extend them outwards towards others. Transcendental meditation is one type of meditation that teaches you to achieve altered states of consciousness. Included in this book is a simple method of meditating that helps you to calm your mind and quiet your thoughts. In addition to these benefits, this meditation can also help you increase your ability to focus and help you to practice mindfulness.

Cultivating Positivity

Because of the extreme usefulness of negative emotions during humanity's early years as hunter-gatherers, our brains are set to automatically pay attention to negative thoughts and feelings. When awareness of a negative situation was the difference between life and death, it made sense for negativity to attract our attention. Positive thoughts and feelings tend to escape our notice unless they

are of the most extreme variety. Noting and celebrating the little things in life that make it good is a good way to begin cultivating positive emotions. Here are some specific ways to increase your positivity:

- **Practice** meditation daily. While most meditation methods are beneficial in cultivating positivity, the loving-kindness meditation is particularly helpful, especially in countering resentments.
- **Let go of resentment** and forgive others. We often think that forgiveness is a way to let wrongdoers off the hook, but forgiveness isn't about the person you're forgiving so much as it is about your letting go of anger that weighs you down. Nevertheless, it would be irresponsible to suggest that forgiving someone is an easy thing to do. One practice that can help is whenever you are angry with someone else, try to make a list of all the things you find good about that person.
- **Celebrate successes** no matter how big or small. Celebrate not just your successes, but other people's successes as well. Human beings are hardwired to connect with each other. When you take an active interest in another person's achievements, you help to reinforce those connections that so enrich our lives.
- **Work to foster positive emotions** such as enthusiasm through singing, dancing, and listening to upbeat music.
- **Exercise.** It's been mentioned many times in this book but bears mentioning again because it is such a benefit.
- **Help others.** Helping out a person in need can have a profound effect on your own thought processes. When we volunteer our time for others, it takes us out of thinking about ourselves, which is often a great source of negativity.

Gratitude

While all of the approaches mentioned thus far will definitely help you to think and feel more positive if you practice them regularly, one of the single most profound practices to increase your optimism, well-being, and cultivate general positivity is to develop an attitude of gratitude. When you wake up each morning, after you eat breakfast, or just before you log into your computer at work, write down in a notebook or type into a word processing document five things for which you are grateful. These can be small and simple such as a particularly choice cup of coffee or an enjoyable dinner the night before. They can also be earth shattering, such as a recovery from an illness or a huge life event such as a wedding or graduation. If you do this every day, it will have a cumulative effect of reorienting your perception so that you become more aware of the good things in life.

Practical Illustration

Darla had recently finished her Master's degree, but she was having difficulties finding a job. Her level of poverty made her feel depressed, which made her far less motivated or energized to go find a new job. Her friend Oprah tried to cheer her up by pointing out what was going well in Darla's life. Oprah was generally an optimistic and enthusiastic person who was constantly remarking about the things she appreciated in life. Darla asked Oprah her secret, and Oprah told her about how Oprah kept a daily gratitude journal. Darla began doing the same. As the days passed, she recognized how whenever she began to dwell on the negative, she'd remember something that she was truly grateful for, and this would change her thinking. One day, Darla was called back after a particularly successful job interview. She was going to get the job. Her new employers told her that they decided to hire her even though her experience level was not as great as others who had applied, but they had found her attitude to be positive and infectious and really wanted to work with her.

Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less.

C.S. Lewis

Chapter Nine: Limitations of Self Awareness

Increasing your self-awareness can be a highly enriching experience. However, it is only a prelude towards greater awareness of your place among others. In fact, too much focus on your self can have detrimental effects.

Navel Gazing

One danger of spending too much time and energy on developing yourself is that you can become stuck in a mode of seeing everything only as it relates to you. This notion of fancying yourself the center of the universe is referred to as navel gazing because it evokes the image of one sitting in meditation staring down at her or his stomach. Once you start becoming more self-aware, it is important to invest time getting out of yourself. As mentioned in the previous chapter, one excellent way of doing so is to seek out opportunities to serve others.

Excessive Self Discipline

Another danger of too much time spent developing yourself is that of excessive self-discipline. Too much discipline can kill your spirit by eliminating spontaneity in your life. Being spontaneous and taking time out to play are important for fostering creativity. Not only that, but if you don't allow yourself to ever play or enjoy the moment, you will begin to rebel against many of the positive practices you have taken up. Too much self-discipline can even make it easier to lapse into child-mode behaviors in your interactions with others. It can also lead to arrogance and an inflated sense of your own importance.

Developing Humility

Striving to be more humble is a key part of many traditions of spiritual practice, but it isn't simply a spiritual act but an ethical one. When you are humble, you don't look to assert your dominance over others or trumpet your accomplishments so that everyone should look up to you. Humility is the act of taking a lower position even when you might feel you deserve more praise or recognition. If you want a great example of humility, look no farther than the acceptance speech that basketball superstar Kevin Durant gave when he won the 2013-14 Season NBA Most Valuable Player Award. Instead of touting all the hard work he engaged in, he spent the duration of his speech appreciating all the hard work and sacrifices that other people in his life gave for him to experience success. Like any other spiritual principle, humility is one that you have to work at. Here are some ways that you can deepen your own humility:

- **Appreciate others.** When you focus on the abilities, concerns, and accomplishments of others, this takes you out of being self oriented. At every opportunity take time to thank other people.
- **Share praise and credit.** Whenever you accomplish anything, if you look carefully, you will find that you didn't do it alone. Other people are always helping us in ways that are sometimes obvious and sometimes subtle. While it may be tempting to bask in people's praise and

adoration, when you find ways to share credit and share praise, you not only help to deepen your humility, but make it so others want to help you even more.

- **Allow others to be first and foremost.** Insisting on being the first in line, the first to raise your hand in a class, the first to get the parking spot, and so on, has a tendency to inflate one's sense of self-importance. However, when you allow others to have the spotlight or be first, it gives you a better vantage point to appreciate their gifts and what they are able to bring to the table. And when you can do this, you actually find yourself in a better position to lead others because you understand how they can best contribute.
- **Don't insist on being right.** Nobody likes to be wrong, including other people. When you are wrong it puts you in a vulnerable position, which can be scary. However, vulnerability is often what makes a person beautiful and appreciable. Allowing others the legitimacy of their beliefs without correction from you is a charitable act.
- **Listen to what other people think more than telling them what you think.** Dale Carnegie once said that the sweetest sound to anyone is the sound of their own voice. Really paying attention to what other people have to say without having to correct or undermine them helps you to stay oriented outward rather than being self-absorbed.
- **Try not to judge others.** An old saying goes like this, "When you point a finger at someone else, you have three fingers pointing back at you." While it is tempting to judge another person, to assess what they are doing and how they are doing it, when you do so, you are presuming that you know better. Unfortunately, unless you have lived the experiences of another person, you cannot know what is best for them. Your grasp on another person's situation will always be incomplete because you don't have the complete picture.

Developing Empathy

Another step you can take to avoid navel gazing is to make a concentrated effort to develop a sense of empathy for others. Empathy is the capacity to understand and relate to how another person may feel in a given situation. If anything, it's the opposite of judging, where you assess another person's actions or circumstances according to your point of view. Here are some ways in which you can further develop your empathy:

- **Listen.** You may not always understand where another person is coming from. Even the most creative and open minded of people can fail to grasp an individual's unique circumstances. Consequently, the only way you can understand where someone else is coming from is by listening to them. However, listening in this sense is not merely listening to the words a person says, but listening for the underlying needs that the person may be expressing even while failing to articulate this.

- **Validate.** Particularly in times where people seem far apart in their political and social beliefs, it's really easy to look at a person with whom you disagree and see an enemy. However, we all have the capacity to feel the same types of emotions, whether these are fear, anger, or joy. We also all have the same basic needs. When you try to recognize that beneath any disagreement are two people who need love and respect, it's not so easy to see someone you disagree with as the enemy.
- **Consider your own attitude.** When you find yourself in a disagreement with someone else, ask yourself what you are wanting out of the interaction. Do you want to see the other person punished? Is this about winning or being right? Wanting to see another person punished presumes that you know best, a dangerously arrogant attitude. Wanting to win or insisting on being right is a kind of vanity that indicates navel-gazing.
- **Suspend your own viewpoint.** When you are trying to understand another person's feelings, your own point of view isn't a necessary perspective. In fact, it gets in the way of seeing another's point of view. Remember that suspending your views is not the same as dropping them or changing them. Your viewpoint will still be there if you still need it.

Practical Illustration

Brian and Jose had both been practicing self-awareness techniques. For Brian, these techniques had begun to make him feel fairly important. He believed that he was really good at being reflective and that people could recognize how good he was at this. As Jose became more self-aware, he realized how little he truly knew, and this attitude allowed him to be open to what others had to say. When they both applied for the same management position, Jose ended up getting the job, even though the bosses felt Brian had greater abilities to strategize, a skill necessary for the new promotion. They gave the job to Jose, who wasn't quite as good at strategizing, but he wasn't bad at it either. Jose got the job because the bosses believed he would be more capable of working with other people and accommodating their needs than Brian because Jose thought less about himself than Brian did and more about others.

We are all in the same boat, in a stormy sea, and we owe each other a terrible loyalty.

G. K. Chesterton

Chapter Ten: Independence versus Interdependence

In Europe before the Renaissance, the idea of individuality wasn't considered a good thing. People lived on farms, and groups of people were far more important than the individual. This was why a person's family name was often more important than the first name. Since then, the idea of independence has become more important, so that most people even think of the notion of dependency as a bad thing. However, now that the Internet and high speed forms of travel and communication have become the norm, the idea of independence as the best form of social organizing is being supplanted by a new notion: interdependence.

What is Interdependence?

The concept of interdependence is a recognition that everything and everyone is interconnected. It's different from dependence because dependence implies a power dynamic. A person who is dependent on someone or something else is under that other entity's power. Interdependency on the other hand suggests that we are all mutually reliant on each other. A company is a good example of interdependence at work. The CEO relies upon customers and the workers at a company as much as they rely upon the CEO. Take any one group out of the equation and the company will fail. When you come into work each day, consider the clothes you are wearing – someone had to make them. Consider the roads you drive upon, or the subway system that you ride to get to work – someone else built this. If you work in an office, consider the level of cleanliness and organization that is there. This helps you to improve your own productivity and performance. On some level, you do some work to keep it organized, but this most likely other people do that work so that you may be more productive. This also goes both ways. Just as you rely upon other people in order to live a productive life, others would not be able to succeed in their lives without your efforts. Insisting upon independence and individuality ignores the notion that we are all in this together.

Systems Theory

Systems theory is a fairly recent mode of understanding information. Our previous way of looking at the world tended to emphasize objects or things. In order to understand something better, scientists would break that thing down into smaller parts. The principle idea in systems theory is that while that practice is useful, it ignores certain important forms of information. Systems theory looks at things as they exist in context with other things. Often, scientists taking this approach are as interested in the interactions and processes between things in a system as they are in the things themselves. Obviously, this is an abstract concept, but it is important when you consider how we interact with each other. If the interaction is as important as the people involved in the interaction, then each interaction becomes a unique event. It's a lot harder to see people in terms of good and bad when each interaction is a unique experience. For example, if a customer has recently experienced a trauma, this might bear on that customer's interaction with a customer service representative. However, what could be a difficult situation in that context does not mean that in another context this customer will be difficult. It is

difficult to remember this because often a negative encounter can have repercussions for our general well-being, but it's important to remember how an environment can affect an interaction without defining any participant in that interaction.

More Than the Sum of All Parts

Proponents of systems theory recognize that we can only look at things in terms of a framework. Anything we observe will be largely determined by what frame we choose to view it in. This is what is meant by the "system" in systems theory. Another idea is that at certain levels of organization, a characteristic can emerge that wasn't present in other levels of organization. For example, we can scientifically describe the chemicals involved in brain processes that account for dreams, but we cannot by that description account for the content of dreams. The actual dream itself can be considered an emergent property of the chemicals in the brain. Another example is that a computer uses binary code to generate all of its processes, including the letters on the page you see here. But it is a code, a shorthand, whereas the letters and the meanings of the sentences are emergent properties. This is relevant to consider when you think of teams. It has been said that a team is more than the sum of its parts, and this is the very principle of emergent properties in action.

Team Building

The fast food industry has a saying, “Aces in their places.” This means that since not everyone can be good at everything, a good team will consist of people who are good or bad at a wide range of things. Through working together, you allow each team member’s strengths to come out while minimizing their weaknesses by covering for each other. Here are some suggestions for how to work better together and allow your team to be more than the sum of its parts:

- Identify each team member’s role. When a people are allowed to play to their strengths, this increases the team’s overall success.
- Identify group weaknesses. Figuring out where you need to improve as a group as soon as you recognize them helps to keep possible sources of conflict from snowballing.
- Play together. Enjoying each other’s company outside of a work setting helps to improve performance in the work setting. When you get to know each other better, you develop a team chemistry.
- Recognize group successes. In work settings, acknowledging when a team is doing well helps to motivate both that team and other teams as well.
- Mediate internal disputes. Whenever you collaborate and are invested in the results, it is inevitable that disputes will arise. When possible, try to resolve disputes in-house. Sometimes however, a dispute may be so polarizing that you need to involve outside mediation. One way to head off disputes before they get out of hand is to have in place good procedures and practices for conflict management. Developing these ahead of time makes sure that everyone knows what steps to take when conflicts arise.

Practical Illustration

Wendell never treated John the custodian with any respect because Wendell felt his job as a market analyst was more important than John's job as a custodian. One day, John broke his leg and had to miss work for the next six weeks. His replacement didn't do as good of a job cleaning as John had done. The replacement janitor would only vacuum the carpet every three days, which made Wendell's allergies act up far more than in the past. Wendell found that the new general level of disorganization in the office was a distraction. A roach crawling across the floor had actually led to Wendell making marking down the wrong number on a forecast in his own work. The mistake led to a big loss in revenue for the company. Although Wendell didn't publicly blame his mistake on the cockroach, he knew that this distraction had helped him to miss his error. Once John returned, Wendell was grateful to have him back and had found a new level of respect for how John contributed to the team. He invited John out for drinks after work and began to see him as an equal and not a lesser person.

Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom.

Aristotle

Closing Thoughts

- **William Shakespeare:** This above all: To thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.
- **Elizabeth Gilbert:** We search for happiness everywhere, but we are like Tolstoy's fabled beggar who spent his life sitting on a pot of gold, under him the whole time. Your treasure – your perfection – is within you already. But to claim it, you must leave the buy commotion of the mind and abandon the desires of the ego and enter into the silence of the heart.
- **Billie Jean King:** I think self-awareness is probably the most important thing towards being a champion.
- **Lao Tzu:** One who knows others is wise. One who knows the self is enlightened.

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