

An Ounce of Prevention

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Self-Awareness: The Key to Taking Care of Your Mental Health and Well-Being

Dr. Jacqueline Baulch (Inner Melbourne Clinical Psychology)

Self-awareness is another one of those terms that gets thrown around quite a bit in the psychology world. So what exactly is it?

Self-awareness is a form of stepping back and observing your thoughts and feelings as they unfold. It can be as simple as noticing the emotions that you feel when you spend time with certain people or the thoughts that run through your head when you feel scared about trying something new. Or it can be a more complex, layered awareness of how your thoughts feed into your emotions, physical sensations, and behaviours. For example, you might notice yourself feeling unmotivated about the day ahead. Your body might feel heavy and your energy low, which might lead you to lay in bed for longer than you intended, which then triggers off thoughts about how stuck you feel and how hard the day ahead is going to be.

Put simply, self-awareness is shining a light on the parts of your internal world that might otherwise get buried down, pushed aside or go unnoticed. Your “internal world” is just psycho-babble for your thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and urges. Awareness of these aspects of yourself is the first step to change and growth. After all, you can’t change what you don’t know about.

Self-awareness takes courage

It’s brave and can often be confronting and uncomfortable. Sometimes you might even question why you decided this was a bright idea in the first place! As the term suggests, at its core self-awareness involves shifting your attention away from what’s happening around you and onto yourself. So instead of focusing on what other people do and say – for example, “my partner doesn’t get it”, “my parents put too much pressure on me” or “my workplace is boring” – the emphasis is placed on how you think and feel. It’s a shift in focus from what’s happening around you, to what’s going on inside you.

You won’t always like what you find and that’s okay (and part of the point!)

You’ll discover new things about yourself when you step back and reflect. Some things you will like and some you won’t. Living alongside our strengths, achievements and lighter side are our fears, inadequacies, regrets, failures, and flaws. As you practise self-awareness you’re likely to tap into the

more challenging, embarrassing, confusing and overwhelming parts of who you are. In fact, if you’re not occasionally thinking to yourself “wow, I wish I hadn’t done that” or “I really don’t like the way I spoke to that person then” you’re most likely hiding from some parts of yourself.

As you get to know these “darker” parts of yourself, your inner critic is likely to rise up and often a strong sense of shame can roll on in. The inner critic feeds off shame and can be a powerful force that shuts down our motivation to be self-aware.

Taking care of yourself is crucial

As you shine a light on parts of your internal world that feel uncomfy and confronting it’s absolutely essential that you counter this with self-care and self-compassion. Practising self-awareness without self-compassion is a recipe for feeling crappy about yourself. Remind yourself that self-awareness is not self-judgement. Honesty is key with self-awareness, but it seems to only be possible with a giant dose of self-compassion and self-care alongside.

It’s important to give some thought to how you will ground and calm yourself if you feel overwhelmed or unsettled by what you become aware of in this process. In fact, before embarking on the journey of self-awareness it’s usually a good idea to strengthen your skills in managing intense emotions.

Contradictions are normal and human

One of the fascinating things about becoming more self-aware is realising how much contradiction exists within you. Your perspective on the world becomes less black and white. Suddenly you notice the grey that exists all around you. For example, instead of only being in contact with all of the reasons that you love your parents, you might also find yourself being more honest about the parts of them that you struggle with and don’t like about them. Or you might notice yourself feeling excited and energised about an upcoming presentation at work, while also feeling scared and unmotivated. Initially you might feel guilty and confused when you notice yourself having such contradictory thoughts and feelings, but with time, this recognition actually seems to feel freeing.

Be aware of the part of you that doesn’t want to be self-aware

For most of us, there will be a part of us that pushes back against the idea of being more honest with yourself about how you think and feel. This makes sense. Put simply, this is just our defence mechanisms in operation. This is our minds way of trying to protect us from getting in touch with things about ourselves that we don’t like, don’t want to admit to or

that feel too painful or scary. Take your time with getting to know yourself in this way. Self-awareness is a lifelong practice and not something to be rushed and bulldozed through, particularly if you have a history of trauma. In fact, hurrying yourself through might lead you to pull back or even throw in the towel completely. Small, sustainable steps are key, and sometimes support and guidance from a professional is needed.

So how do you become more self-aware?

This is a big question with an even bigger answer. The ways in which we can become more self-aware are endless. This post isn't really a "how to" kind of post, it's more an exploration of the concept of self-awareness, but some of the ways that we can enhance our self-awareness are through journaling, meditation, mindfulness, the breath, speaking with people we trust, seeing a therapist, trying new things, through the arts, by paying attention to our dreams, through taking risks, by allowing ourselves to fail, by speaking up and by sitting in stillness.

A simple way to begin practising self-awareness is by regularly checking and asking yourself:

- What am I feeling in my body right now?
- What thoughts are running through my mind? What am I saying to myself?
- What emotions are around?
- What am I wanting to do or what am I doing as a consequence of how I think and feel?

Of course, it goes without saying that self-awareness is not the sole ingredient for change and growth. There are many other factors needed for us to shift some of the challenges and ongoing patterns in our lives, but self-awareness seems to be the essential first step on this important path.

In the words of one of the great therapists, Carl Rogers, "The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change".

How to Practice Mindfulness

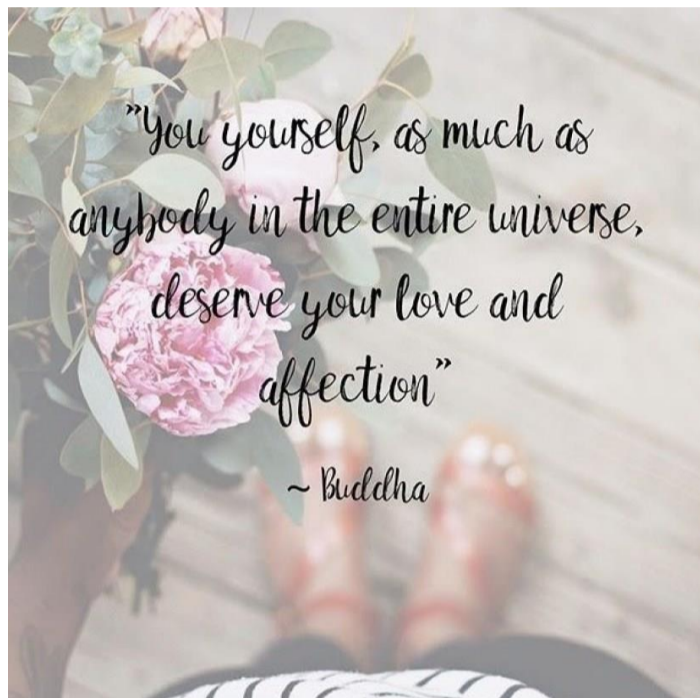
Mindful.org

While mindfulness might seem simple, it's not necessarily all that easy. The real work is to make time every day to just keep doing it. Here's a short practice to get you started:

1. **Take a seat.** Find a place to sit that feels calm and quiet to you.
2. **Set a time limit.** If you're just beginning, it can help to choose a short time, such as 5 or 10 minutes.
3. **Notice your body.** You can sit in a chair with your feet on the floor, you can sit loosely cross-legged, in lotus posture, you can kneel—all are fine. Just make sure you are stable and in a position you can stay in for a while.

4. **Feel your breath.** Follow the sensation of your breath as it goes out and as it goes in.
5. **Notice when your mind has wandered.** Inevitably, your attention will leave the sensations of the breath and wander to other places. When you get around to noticing this—in a few seconds, a minute, five minutes—simply return your attention to the breath.
6. **Be kind to your wandering mind.** Don't judge yourself or obsess over the content of the thoughts you find yourself lost in. Just come back.

That's it! That's the practice. You go away, you come back, and you try to do it as kindly as possible.



Net News

Here are some web sites you & your family may find helpful.

Resilience in Children

<https://strongmindsstrongkids.org/Public/Resources/COVID-19/Public/COVID-19.aspx?hkey=6ff9cc2d-fdb2-4139-8dea-eda052dea4b3>

Self-Esteem and Children

<https://positivepsychology.com/self-esteem-for-children/>

Guided Meditation for Anxiety

<https://youtu.be/s0PO2xo7I9g>

Self- Help Corner:

Alcoholics Anonymous: 780-424-5900

www.alcoholics-anonymous.org

Al-Anon/Alateen: 780-433-1818

Support Network / Referral Line: 211

Distress Line: 780 482-4357

Cocaine Anonymous: 780-425-2715

Access 24/7 – 780 424 2424

Informative Links:

The National Women's Health Information Center:

<https://www.womenshealth.gov/>