

How To Improve Emotional Self-Awareness

By Granville D'Souza

Self-awareness requires an ability to tune into our true feelings, evaluate and monitor our emotions, and manage them. The goal is balance, not emotional suppression — recognizing that every feeling has its value and significance.

The next step is realizing that we have the freedom of choice — that we are not beholden to our sentiments. Only by learning how to overcome instinctive responses can we truly become emotionally self-aware.

Here are 3 tips to improve emotional self-awareness:

Tip 1: Slow down and explore your emotions

Emotions can be unwieldy and unravel slowly like a ball of string. We often become impatient or demand immediate results. If we don't see results, we often lose interest and give up too quickly. Tuning in to our emotions takes time. Breakthroughs won't happen immediately. For example, when faced with nervousness and anxiety, we can do an initial assessment: "I'm nervous", we deduce, thoroughly unimpressed. This is a statement of the obvious. The usual *modus operandi* is to tune back into our external world and ignore the feeling.

In any situation stop and ask yourself, what am I feeling right now? How is that feeling affecting my thoughts? My behaviours? What pattern am I following?

As you focus your attention on your emotions and reactions, you will increase your awareness and begin to command emotions and use them as information for decision-making and not just as sensory experiences that are passively accepted. To improve your self-awareness, spend time sorting and sifting through your emotions, trying to figure out where they're coming from and why you feel them as you do.

Dealing with anger: In moments of anger, we often think venting our rage is the appropriate thing to do. In fact, "venting" usually increases anger! While there may be specific conditions and scenarios in which lashing out helps (particularly when it is directed to the person who is the target, when it returns a sense of control, or when it effects a change or correction in the grievous activity), in general, anger's provocative nature does more harm than good. Outbursts tend to over-stimulate the brain, leaving people angrier not less. A more effective strategy is one that takes advantage of self-awareness principles: cool down first, and then confront the person in a more constructive and assertive manner. What is your pattern when anger takes over you? A typical pattern is, "When someone makes me angry, I press one of their buttons to get them to react and feel some discomfort or more discomfort". It is an unconscious self-assault because in doing so, the vicious cycle starts to circulate.

Dealing with anxiety: Another emotional state that can be mediated by self-awareness is anxiety. Chronic, repetitive worries are the kind that plague us on occasion: low-grade but steady worry, often impervious to reason and locking us into a concentrated state of nail-biting worry. As this condition persists, it often intensifies and can flare up into anxiety disorders like obsessions, phobias, and compulsive attacks. Catching worrisome episodes early on by monitoring cues of anxiety, especially learning to identify situations that trigger worry, can help people staunch the worry cycle. With self-awareness, the worrier can take a defensive stance using a combination of mindfulness and active scepticism. Without it, the worry can go unchallenged and can quickly intensify. A typical pattern when anxiety catches us and does not want to let go is, “When I start to worry, past episodes related or unrelated to me become pronounced”. I can choose to focus on how such episodes are handled by those who have gotten through similar situations.

Tip 2: Solicit and listen to other people's feedback

Listening to other people doesn't mean you have to agree with them. The points of view and advice of other people help us filter and accept different perspectives. They help us fine-tune, adjust, adapt and clarify our own patterns of behaviour.

When people don't listen to each other, emotions become taut like a rope in a tug-of-war. The longer the contest lasts, the more dangerous it becomes and the harder it is to stop. Against such forces in opposition, no one really wins. Each victory only makes the next go-round argument more difficult.

This tension doesn't have to stem from a full-on fight or battle. It can be tension between two people who have a one-sided friendship, where one friend always asks for favours without showing gratitude or returning the favour. The other friend may feel neglected, taken advantage of, and begin to resent the other person. What is your pattern in this situation? Do you fight it out, give in, hide your discomfort, or take some other approach?

But as soon as someone lets go and opens up, dropping the “rope” that represents the mutual tension, things start to change. One way to deal with these kinds of one-sided relationships is to use emotional listening, or ‘mirroring.’ Mirroring is often used in marital therapy to help couples mediate their differences and disarm potential blow ups. For example, when a partner attacks with a complaint, the other partner will repeat the complaint in different words, attempting to clarify not just the thought but also the feelings that go with it.

The partner checks to see if the restatement is on target. When we are mirrored we feel more emotionally attuned with the other person, which can often prevent a fight from escalating to a full-on personal attack. This keeps the discussion non-defensive and accusatory and helps resolve the conflict. What's key is to recognize your patterns in interactions with others and make intentional change when needed.

Tip 3: Take off the ‘mask’

As we have discussed, self-awareness starts with opening yourself up. This means getting rid of personal barriers to your feelings, such as diluting your feelings through a false exterior, or adjusting your behaviours, reactions and responses so as not to expose what you really think or feel. The mask also represents emotional defensiveness or even how we obscure our emotions. In a world where we wear masks, we are living constricted lives rather than living expansively.

In a better world where we take off our masks, we begin to get real about life and our relationships with others.



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