



The Depths of Self-Awareness

All of your problems reflect absent self-awareness, just as your successes are the result of it.

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“The second you think that all your good fortune is a product of your virtue, you become highly judgmental, lacking empathy, totally without self-awareness, arrogant, stupid - I mean, all the stuff that our ruling class is.”

— **Tucker Carlson**

Over the Horizon

Self-awareness is one of those high-level ideas that has something to do with everything but, because it's so broad, it doesn't grab our attention. Something like the horizon, which is essential to balance and orientation, is always there somewhere, and seems rarely worth noticing.

There are extremes of awareness we consider fearful, stern, or awesome. The frightening claustrophobia of being deprived of awareness, to be a vegetable. The stern warning to look both ways before crossing the street. Or the awesome prospect of enlightened, universal awareness. But drama aside, we don't really care.

We're overlooking a valuable topic. Awareness is not just a topic for stoned conversations, but an actual thing that we can pick up and move forward. Or, if not move forward, then it's a sufficiently bright horizon that we can see it through the transparency of all our daily realities.

Self-Awareness is as Overlooked As the Air We Breath

Unlike energy, of which there is one kind that's required for everything, all things require different awarenesses. You can't do anything without energy, but you can do anything without awareness. Most of what we do is done without awareness and we generally don't notice.

There is a physical law that says systems proceed in ways that use the least energy. It's called the principle of least action. Similarly, most of our behavior reflects a desire to accomplish the most with the least awareness. We could call it, "The Principle of Least Awareness."

We can't be aware of everything. We have to be selective. The Principle of Least Awareness ensures that we're always holding as much awareness as possible in reserve. That way, when something really important happens, we're not gobsmailed, we're ready for it.

While it's good to always be ready, the undesirable result is that we perform poorly. In fact, we have a cultural meme of the over-present person, the mover and shaker who stirs things up. That's the image and we endorse it, but we rarely do it. There are no statues of famous couch potatoes but, to be honest, few of us hold our feet to the fire.

Higher Standards

Most of the problems my clients bring to me would be solved if they had been more aware. The problems they now bring relate to issues they've long overlooked. Nobody's perfect, but that's not really an excuse for why you're suffering now. Had you known you'd be in this situation, you probably would have paid more attention in the past. But you didn't know, and you didn't train your skills, and now, like a vestigial organ, the particular awareness that you need has either atrophied or never developed at all.

It helps to blame other people. It may not be reasonable, but you've got to start somewhere, and blaming yourself is depressing. We see ourselves in our reflection in the world, and the people we failed to consider and who now bother us simply reflect the awareness we didn't develop.

Some of my clients may not have been up to the task. I think of them as disabled. If they weren't disabled before, they are now. I try to turn their attention to aspects of their realities that they've overlooked. Some of this is common sense, like stop getting angry with other people for their idiocy.

Some of it is emotional regulation pertaining to events that trigger them and send them yet again around a circular canyon with no visible horizon, only to return to where they started.

My clients seem like unusually smart people. This has allowed me to revise an early prejudice that it's the weaker people who seek counseling. From what I see, it's the stronger ones. The ones who are aware of their rut, their blindness, and the energy it's going to take to do something about it. I don't know for sure, but if they accept my perspective, then I'll think they're smart.

To explore self-awareness as a solution to all of your problems, press this button to book a free call with me.

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Reduction Can Be Absurd

We like to reduce things to their parts, or summarize them as a whole. Self-awareness, like consciousness, is a holistic idea. Anger, fear, clarity, and impatience are some parts we break things into. Considered together, these might create a reasonable picture. Apart, they are insufficient. Self-awareness, taken by itself, is an insufficient concept.

The lack of self-awareness is not one thing, it's a set of emotional dysfunctions rather than disabilities. Such a person lacks awareness of certain aspects of themselves. Some might be authentically disabled, which is how we think of autistics, but most are unconsciously shutting out awareness they do not want or are not ready to face.

Consider childhood abuse, which can cause developmental failures, or aspects of development that did not complete. Such a person will typically develop disorders which outsiders can note, but of which the abused person is unaware. These people lack self-awareness, but that only summarizes their situation.

The truth is a constellation of issues, or a network of associations. Their lack of self-awareness may suffice as a convenient label, but it is an explanation that is neither sufficient nor illuminating.

Defensiveness, Dishonesty, and Arrogance

In the book *Insight: The Surprising Truth About How Others See Us, How We See Ourselves, and Why the Answers Matter More Than We Think*, Tasha Eurich (2018) emphasizes four qualities associated with a lack of self-awareness. These are defensiveness, dishonesty, arrogance, and a lack of empathy. A fifth and more general quality is a lack of interest in becoming more aware.

Defensiveness is a direct consequence of not understanding what others intend, and not being managing relationships effectively. The defensive person is fearful because they associate situations in the present with past situations they don't remember and don't want to.

A threat properly recognized doesn't lead you to take a defensive attitude. It leads you to stop communicating and defend yourself. If there's any further talking, it's for purposes of distraction.

Dishonesty can be intentional or unintentional, and it's the unintentional liar who is the real problem. A person who cannot see clearly cannot express the truth. Unintentionally dishonest people believe in what they see without knowing it's pathological. Their dishonest response reflects a true distortion.

We'll see these misdirections as deviant, but we would better understand them as delusional. We're all deluded to some extent, but the self-unaware person markets their reality without skill or recognition.

Arrogance is relative to one's point of view and comes from intolerance. It's more of a distorted sense of justice than a lack of awareness. Like the driver of a car with loose steering, arrogant people overreact. We see them as straying outside the bounds of accepted behavior.

Empathy

Finally, there's empathy, the quality of resonating with another person's feelings. Empathy may seem lacking in a person who lacks self-awareness, but this is a misunderstanding of how we recognize it. We often cannot distinguish true from feigned empathy and take the feigned version to be more authentic.

Empathy is so important that people lacking it learn to pretend. A good pretender is more convincing than a person who is honestly empathetic because they are unambiguous. We're more inclined to believe the simple version, as anyone knows who accepts the declaration, "I love you." The un-self-aware person learns to say what's appropriate.

Many forms of emotional dysregulation result from a lack of empathy. Psychopaths, paranoids, and people with borderline personality disorder all lack empathy, but so do people with neurotic conditions like aggression, mania, and depression who cannot engage empathetically with others. My whole life has been a lesson in empathy.

It is misleading to associate a lack of self-awareness with these supposedly definitive qualities. Defensiveness can be an overreaction, a misunderstanding, a traumatic response, paranoia, or poor communication. Dishonesty is more of a pathology than a tendency. Arrogance is complicated, and empathy exists on a spectrum.

Self-awareness is a holistic description with many aspects. It's a place to start with people who seem to lack it, but building it requires many components.

As a therapist, I find the most potent place to start is nowhere: that place where people drop their preconceptions. You must drop what you think you know before creating any new understanding. Self-awareness is what you get when you realize you don't understand.

References

Eurich, Tasha. 2019. *Insight: The Surprising Truth About How Others See Us, How We See Ourselves, and Why the Answers Matter More Than We Think*. Crown Currency

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