

Why Self-Awareness Is the Secret Weapon for Habit Change

Real habit change comes from taking a candid look at your shortcomings. Or, as Epictetus once said: "Self-scrutiny applied with kindness."

By [Paul Jun](#)

More than we'd probably like to admit so many of our days are spent in a state of self-delusion, an internal monologue of justifying our actions, both good and bad. When we do something wrong, our evolutionary instincts kick in and we do anything we can to not acknowledge the obvious: sometimes, it's all our fault.

The examples should sound familiar: We get necessary and helpful feedback from a boss or colleague, only to snarl under our breath, but failing to realize the foolishness on our end. We become aware of our declining efficiency, so instead of treating the disease we treat the symptoms and we chug coffee only to crash an hour later face-first into our keyboard (and then we go searching for productivity hacks because our workload is too high).

Over time, this becomes our routine, our default reaction, and we fail to stop and reflect on what we're doing. To make it even more difficult, many of us don't have the luxury of someone being accountable for us (who does?), helping us recognize our mistakes and their repercussions.

Catching ourselves before we engage in our typical default reactions is one of the greatest challenges of our lives, but when done relentlessly and with discipline and moments of reflection, mindfulness ensues. It's human nature to first experience and then explain. How difficult it is to be in the midst of trolling, stopping yourself and admitting, "Wait a minute, I'm trolling right now because this person's opinion just sucker-punched my ego, and I feel a visceral desire to tell this person they're an idiot so I can feel better!" Instead, we hit send and then explain why we did it.

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In the words of *Harvard Business Review* writer [Anthony K. Tjan](#), "...there is one quality that trumps all, evident in virtually every great entrepreneur, manager, and leader. That quality is self-awareness. The best thing leaders can [do] to improve their effectiveness is to become more aware of what motivates them and their decision-making."

Taking pause, and allowing a moment of reflection where we gain clarity and realize our foolishness is so vital to cultivating self-awareness. You're fighting against all your adaptive and evolutionary behaviours—your mind is hardwired to protect itself at all times—so instead of expending energy on fruitless actions for the sake of a damaged ego, you pause, reflect, and do what's best for you.

Self-awareness is defined as conscious knowledge of oneself; it's a stepping stone to reinventing oneself, learning to make wiser decisions, and helps you tune into your thoughts and feelings. So often we place blame on externalities because it's the easiest excuse, when in fact we should be thinking about our thinking, reflecting, trying on different perspectives, and learning from our mistakes.

The Roman philosopher Seneca once said, "For a person who is not aware that he is doing anything wrong has no desire to be put right. You have to catch yourself doing it before you can reform."

There isn't one way to exercise self-awareness, and everyone will meet it in different ways, so below I will outline a few tactics that I hope will help you in this arduous yet equally rewarding practice.

1. The pursuit of self-awareness is difficult and requires dedication.

"The force that can save the amateur is awareness, particularly self-awareness. But the amateur understands, however dimly, that if she truly achieved this knowledge, she would be compelled to act upon it. To act upon this self-awareness would mean defining herself, i.e., differentiating herself from the tribe and thus making herself vulnerable to rejection, expulsion, and all the other fears that self-definition elicits." — Steven Pressfield, Turning Pro

To be conscious of who you are, how you think, and what you do is invaluable because it leads to self-knowledge, and in turn, change. Perhaps this is why in practices like Alcoholics Anonymous and cognitive behavioural therapy they first help the individual become self-aware—to be *conscious* of their fears, thoughts, behaviours, mustering the courage to *own* it, and using that awareness to facilitate behavioural change.

The dedication required to change our mind and behavior is the fight of our lives. It's within human nature to habituate, to create routines, so that our brain exerts less effort and spends less energy. The potential danger in this is that we can get too comfortable doing the wrong things, and as Seneca previously said, if we are unaware of it we may have no desire to be put right.

What makes this pursuit particularly difficult is because it isn't a popular topic of discussion in our culture. It's not championed in the institutions that raise us. It is extremely difficult to humbly admit a shortcoming instead of fabricating a tale to mitigate the blow.

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And there's the crux of searching for self-awareness: Do we embrace the "ignorance is bliss" adage when a bright light shines on our flaws? Do we simply escape the reality of who are and let the tides of the day carry us adrift? Or we do face ourselves and move onward towards a path that allows us to reinvent ourselves to embrace our best, truest selves, regardless of how painful it may be at times?

Don't let those who have fallen into a comfortable groove tell you that this is how life is supposed to be lived. Reflect on your shortcoming, understand the source of its weakness, observe your own contributions or lack thereof, and deeply internalize the lesson so that next time you can play a bigger role. It's going to be hard, because the mind will thrive to defend you from any opposing information or perspective. It will push for unrealistic attitudes to make you feel better because, hey, you need to survive. This isn't only our default reaction, it's simply human nature.

2. Practice being self-reflective.

"Meditation is a rich and powerful method of study for anyone who knows how to examine his mind, and to employ it vigorously. I would rather shape my soul than furnish it. There is no exercise that is either feeble or more strenuous, according to the nature of the mind concerned, than that of conversing with one's own thoughts. The greatest men make it their vocation, 'those for whom to live is to think.'" — Montaigne, Essays

At the end of the day, before I go to sleep, I spend ten to twenty minutes meditating. What that really means is I sit there in the dark reflecting on my day, playing the events in my head and pinpointing where I made mistakes.

I ask myself a series of questions to help me digest my day: Did I do what was required of me? Why was I nervous when speaking to that stranger? What did I learn today that was useful? Was I kind to others, to myself? Did I exercise? Why did I check Instagram 10 times in the midst of company? When my friend was telling me a story, why did I tune out?

I do this in hopes that tomorrow I can approach the day with clarity and a better mindset and to acknowledge where I fell short so that I can improve. But you don't have to meditate in the sense that you're sitting cross-legged with your eyes closed. You can journal your thoughts. You can simply think out loud while pacing around your room. You can discuss it with a close friend, asking them for their perspective so it can shine a light on your misperceptions.

Self-reflection can take place anywhere at any time. After a heated debate or after realizing a failure, stop yourself from reacting emotionally (which is difficult, for sure). Instead, reflect on the event, look at the individual parts, and be curious as to why it didn't work out. Seek to understand, not to be right. Where are the faults? What was missed? What piece of the puzzle is missing to help you understand, to alleviate the frustrations, to put the event into perspective? In these moments you're filled with insecurities and misperceptions. This is far more helpful for devising a solution than ranting and complaining.

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3. Have a philosophical foundation to return to.

"To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school . . . it is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically." — Henry David Thoreau

If you look at any story where the hero is aided by a wise teacher—Luke Skywalker and Yoda; Frodo and Gandalf; Harry Potter and Dumbledore; the grandmaster and the novice; the general and the soldier—what we're seeing is the teaching of practical wisdom from teacher to student. The common themes of sacrifice, selflessness, humility, courage, duty, honour, are all aims that we strive for in our daily lives but we sometimes lose our focus. These mentors were around to instil a moral code in their pupils. When we don't have a more experienced colleague to nudge us back into place, philosophy can serve as our guide, our champion.

The challenge, of course, is remembering to return to our philosophy the way we would call a friend in a time of despair. It's not so much about fully embracing one philosophical (or religious) school—Stoicism or, say, Buddhism—but to take principles, practical wisdom that has been talked about throughout all of human history, and to utilize it in your life. Sometimes, we need a little "do this, not that."

For example, after realizing that you had wasted your most creative hours manicuring your social media profiles, can you learn from that error? Can you admit to yourself, "I messed up. Time to get to work." Or will you just blame writer's block or some bogus excuse? Is there a specific quote or mantra or passage from a book that can help you refocus your energies to stop procrastinating and actually do the work? Or perhaps you have a hero that you look up to. Is that what they would do? Stumble around and blame the muse or actually sit down and work?

Roman philosopher Epictetus once said that a good philosophy is, "Self-scrutiny applied with kindness." You must learn to face yourself, to admit mistakes, to learn from them, and to let that awareness motivate and change you. Because frankly, who else is responsible for the quality of your life? Above all, you have to be compassionate with yourself because this change is a slow and steady process, a struggle to override old habits and to ultimately form new ones that define who you become.

You must realize that this process of exercising self-awareness is increasingly difficult because everything from cultural influences to your ancient brain is fighting against you. It is far easier to throw a mental tantrum, to blame externalities, to flee from the painful reality of our flaws and mistakes.

The late, great Maya Angelou once said that, “When you know better, you do better.” Once you have made a mistake and learned from it, you are put in a position to act out your lessons learned. There’s a reason we’re told to keep a budget to fix financial woes, or to keep a food diary when trying to eat right: self-knowledge is power. Without a clear view of our mental landscape, it’s easy to fall back on bad habits, to repeat the same errors we did yesterday. (And even if we do, that’s just another opportunity to learn about ourselves.)

Self-improvement is not about finishing a book or a seminar. Self-awareness is a practice, a muscle that grows with time and effort that ultimately provides us strength. We are in a constant state of change, adapting to our cultural influences and our individual experiences. The more we learn to be conscious of our impulses, thoughts, and actions, while also keeping in mind our principles that foster practical wisdom, we can more easily become our best selves.

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