



Awareness – Ingrained Patterns

Awareness is the essence of healing in that you cannot stimulate your brain to develop in a given direction, unless you know where you are starting from. Awareness is both a tool and foundation for moving forward with your life. Of the four categories of awareness **ingrained attitudes and thought patterns** are problematic. By definition, you cannot see them without actively seeking them out.

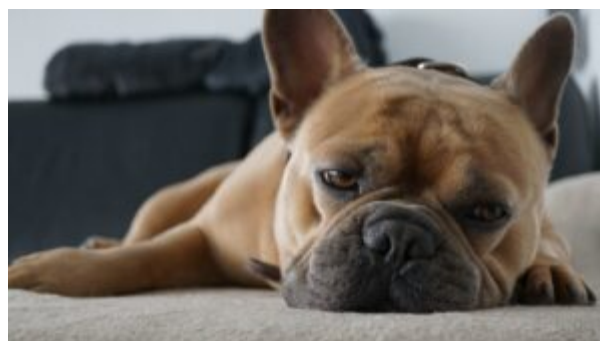


Ingrained Patterns – Blind Spots

Our family interactions in childhood are at the root of how we act as adults. The behaviors we develop over a lifetime of exposure to our environment are what I call ingrained patterns. They stem from our upbringing and the fact that our brain is somewhat “hard-wired” during our formative years. We now know from recent neuroscience research that concepts and attitudes are embedded in our brains as concretely as our perception of a chair or table. I used to say that thoughts are real because they cause neurochemical responses in your body. But they are not reality. I was wrong.

It turns out that your thoughts and ideals are *your version of reality*. Your current life outlook continues to evolve along your early programming or your “filter.” It is why we become so attached to our politics, religion, belief systems, etc. It is also the reason that humans treat each other so badly based on labels. One example, amongst an endless list, was how we locked up “communists” during the McCarthy era of the 1950’s and 1960’s. It is why so many minority groups are persecuted, but they also often treat each other badly.

It is critical to understand that these are attitudes and behaviors that you cannot see because they are inherent to who you are. It is also maybe the greatest obstacle to people getting along. We are hard-wired enough that we don’t recognize or “feel” these patterns; it’s just what we do. It’s behavior that sits under many layers of defenses and has to be “dug out” by each person. Our family-influenced habits and actions are much more obvious to our spouses and immediate family than they are to us; we can only get in touch with them through counseling, seminars, psychotherapy, self-reflection, spousal feedback, etc. What you are not aware of can and will control you.



A humbling and enlightening day at Hyde

I didn't realize the extent of my own unawareness until I was at a Hyde parents' seminar one weekend. Hyde is a boarding high school that emphasizes character over academics and includes the whole family in a learning process.

The week before, my regional West Coast Hyde group had worked me over about issues with my son that I hadn't seen very clearly. I was not in a great mood. I was a little negative and had decided to not contribute much to the group. What I didn't realize was that as a result, I would end up actually listening.

I watched one father try to be the perfect Hyde seminar parent. He was a great, well-intentioned guy, but these very qualities were clearly blocking him from connecting with his son. I realized how often I had played that role in my own life.

One of the exercises was to write a final letter to myself about my core values. I decided to open up my mind a little more and asked myself the question, "If I'm so enlightened, why am I such a workaholic?" During this session, a story kept popping into my head from when I was a first-year orthopedic resident in Honolulu, Hawaii. About three months into my training, I overheard one of the other residents talking about admitting a patient with severe back pain who also had an anxiety disorder. I asked him, "What do you mean by anxiety disorder?" I had no idea what anxiety was; I had to look it up in a textbook.

Eventually, I developed a severe anxiety disorder. As I sat in the Hyde seminar room looking back, I couldn't figure out how I could have gone through college, medical school, and two years of internal medicine residency and not have had a clue about the nature of anxiety. Obviously, I'd encountered many anxiety-provoking situations.

That afternoon a bomb went off in my head. Anxiety, in fact, was all that I knew. I'd been raised in an abusive household, never knowing when my mother would explode. She was, at some level, experiencing rage most of the time. Fear was the basis of all of my behavior going forward. Most of my energy as a child was spent trying not to set my mother off and/or calming her down. Most of my energy in adulthood was spent in avoiding unpleasant emotions: I dealt with anger by suppressing it and I addressed anxiety by staying distracted, mostly by my work.

It is, by definition, not possible to recognize your own ingrained patterns without being open to outside input or having the desire to develop self-awareness. Usually, it takes some type of interaction with another person in an individual or group setting. Hyde set up a structure for me to realize my patterns. The didactic part of it was critical, but my paradigm shift would not have occurred without the support of the people in that room. They were instrumental in permanently changing my life.

You cannot see yourself the way others see you. You have to make a decision to learn more about these patterns from outside sources to become aware of the impact on your life and others close to you.