



Becoming Aware of Your “Unawareness”

As I look back on my life journey, one of the most disturbing aspects is to realize the extent of my unawareness.

I was raised in a difficult family environment and by my eighteenth birthday, had lived in twelve different houses. At age fifteen, I decided that I'd had enough of all the chaos and began to build my own life and persona. I worked hard at developing my identity and moved at warp speed for over twenty years. I was idealistic and thought I was a great student, and then a great husband, father, and doctor. The problem, in retrospect, was that I was connected to my identity – how I wanted to see myself and how others saw me – instead of to my true self. No one picked up on it, including me.



In my mind I was always “right” and could not figure out why people did not listen to my “wisdom” more carefully. I wasn't a good listener, myself, but I was unaware of this fact. I recall that someone once referred to my “obsessive nature.” I didn't have a clue what they were talking about. I didn't know what the word really meant, but whatever sense I had of it, I was certain it didn't apply to me.

I was able to outwardly perform my “roles” in life very well until I experienced a panic attack out of the blue at age thirty-seven. My identity started to fall apart and then fifteen years of chronic pain stripped away the rest of my facade.

Clues to unawareness

That period of my life didn't need to be that difficult. It was largely due to my unawareness. How can you tap into your unawareness? One way is to look for cues in certain behaviors and attitudes that may mean you're out of touch with how you're feeling. Some examples include:

- Having a rigid opinion about almost anything: religion, politics, someone's character, etc.
- Being told you're stubborn or “not listening”
- Interrupting someone to offer an opinion before you've heard theirs in total
- Being “right”
- Consistently thinking about something besides what you're doing
- Thinking you're wiser than your children

- Acting on impulse
- Judging yourself or others negatively or positively
 - Being persistently critical of your spouse, partner and/or children
 - Giving unasked-for advice
 - Gossiping
- Feeling anxious or angry (once those feelings have been recognized and acknowledged in your life). These reactions are automatic and powerful. Awareness is impossible while you are in one of these states. What is really ironic, is that when you are angry, you feel like you have a perfect understanding of the issues. The term for this is, “negative transference.” You are actually completely disconnected because it is only about you.

You can’t outrun your past

This list is endless. The first fifty years of my life, most, if not all of the above applied to me, and yet I had no insight into my unawareness; if I started to feel any negative emotions, I quickly suppressed them. The list still applies to me, although my tools to deal with my unawareness have evolved. You will initially always view the world through your past experiences and learning. Dropping the filter of your perspective is a lifetime task.

If you noticed some of the above behaviors or attitudes in yourself, it’s probably time to take a step back and begin to work on seeing the world through other peoples’ eyes. I still use these cues daily, as awareness is a minute-by-minute experience.

Judgement

One of these cues, self-judgment, was a big part of my life and a major sign that I was unaware of my own patterns. It happened during my period of severe burnout, which occurred concurrently to my chronic pain. During that era, I had endless self-doubts and negative judgments about almost every aspect of my life. A severe case of perfectionism didn’t help the situation. I often thought how much better it would be if I could judge myself positively with as much fervor.



I did turn my life around, and I’ve been able to help many people by drawing on the lessons I learned in barely surviving a severe depression. My practice thrived and I had an excellent reputation. I enjoy my family and friends.

It’s great to enjoy the fruits of one’s labors. However, as soon as I go into a mode of “what a compassionate guy I am” or “what a great surgeon I am” it takes me right down. Any effort on my part to spin my life in a positive way to others drains me of the energy I need to be creative and also distracts me from being aware of what’s occurring right in front of me. For me, it turns out that positive self-judgment is just as disruptive as negative self-judgment. It’s still judgment. Once you have placed a label on anyone or anything you can no longer see clearly.