



# Types of Awareness

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There are many ways that awareness can be implemented as part of the solution throughout your Process. It is useful to consider awareness from these four perspectives:

- Environmental
- Emotional
- Storytelling/Judgmental
- Ingrained patterns

**Environmental awareness** involves placing your attention on a single sensation – taste, touch, sound, temperature, etc. When you switch your sensory input from racing thoughts to a different sensation, it dampens the stress hormone response. This is the basis of mindfulness – fully experiencing what you are doing in the moment.

I use an abbreviated version that I call “active meditation,” which is placing my attention on a specific sensory input for 5 to 10 seconds. It is simple and can be done multiple times per day. Eventually, it can become somewhat automatic.

## Meditation

Meditation is an advanced environmental awareness that taps into emotions, judgments, and even your ingrained patterns. There are various methods and schools of thought to connect fully with the present moment. One basic technique is to focus only on your breath, becoming aware of as many aspects of your breathing as you can. As you do this, you’ll become immersed in the moment. Various distracting thoughts will enter your mind, but instead of becoming enmeshed with them, you simply watch them come, and then watch them leave. The goal is not to ignore these thoughts, but to learn how to not react to them. This is the process of detachment. After the momentary distraction, you gently pull yourself back to your breathing as quickly as possible.

When you meditate, you don’t try to slow down or control your racing thoughts. Instead, you “de-energize” them so that they have less control over you. As you develop the ability to stay in the present moment, the thoughts become less relevant and decrease—often dramatically. The key is to not try and edit, fix, or control them; that will only make them stronger.

**Emotional awareness** is more challenging. It often works for a while, but then it doesn’t. When you are suppressing feelings of anxiety, your body’s chemistry is still off and full of stress hormones. This translates into many different physical symptoms, since each organ system exhibits a specific response.

Allowing yourself to feel all of your emotions is the first step in healing; you can’t change what you can’t feel. However, you have to train yourself to tolerate feeling vulnerable, which most of us hate. We are programmed to be tough and take care of ourselves.

One of my colleagues coined a phrase, “You have to feel to heal.” If you are intent on avoiding pain, you’ll become worn down. The key is to assimilate anxiety into your day-to-day life.

**Judgment/ Storytelling** is a major contributor to creating mental chaos in our lives. Dr. David Burns in his book *“Feeling Good”* outlines 10 cognitive distortions that are a core part of our upbringing. Some of them include:

- Labeling yourself or others
- “Should” thinking – the essence of perfectionism
- Focusing on the negative
- Minimizing the positive
- Catastrophizing
- Emotional reasoning

You can’t fix these “errors” in thinking, since they are deeply embedded, but gaining awareness allows you to substitute more rational thought patterns. This is the essence of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). Another approach, called Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT), creates an awareness of these distortions and then you train yourself to just be with them. The as the reaction to the thoughts decreased, you are able to re-direct your attention on your terms.

**Ingrained thought patterns** are the most problematic. Another term for this aspect of consciousness is “blind spots.” Recent neuroscience research has revealed that thoughts, concepts, and ideals become embedded in our brains and are just as real to you as the chair you are sitting in. (1) We are all programmed by our pasts. Your thoughts and beliefs are your version of reality. That is why people engage in aggressive behavior when their belief systems are challenged. By definition, your beliefs are your “filter” through which you interpret your environment and take the best actions to survive and hopefully thrive.

But while in pain, many of our behaviors are less than ideal. How could they be otherwise in the context of so much suffering and misery? But since these deep reactions have always been there from infancy, you can’t see them or understand the impact they are having on those close to you. Having a strong support system is an important part of your recovery from chronic pain because positive relationships have a calming effect. Unfortunately, many of us who experience chronic pain also experience driving people away. Only awareness of your own patterns can grant you freedom from this cycle. By definition, you are not going to be able to see these patterns without outside observation. Seeing how others see you is challenging.



## Practicing awareness—summary

Understanding and practicing awareness is the first step in reprogramming your brain. Your brain's structure is physically altered. The sequence is as follows: awareness, separation, and re-programming.

Environmental awareness is the foundational **first step**. Spending time with “active meditation” both changes the sensory input from unpleasant and disruptive to neutral or pleasant. Regardless of where you are in your journey, practicing awareness will help calm you down.

When you are ready for the **second level** of emotional awareness, simply watch your emotions pass by. Then, pull yourself back into seeing, hearing, and feeling as quickly as possible. It is a little challenging, as emotions often evoke powerful reactions. Training yourself to be with these feelings instead of fighting them is a learned skill and may require some support from a professional.

The **third level** – judgment – is a lifetime journey. The key is to be persistent in not judging others or yourself. A good starting point is understanding that whenever you place a positive or negative judgment on someone else, you have simply projected your view of yourself onto the world. As you become aware of these cognitive distortions, you will be able to regain control of your life.

Remember that in the **fourth level** of ingrained patterns, it is impossible to see yourself through your own eyes. This is where resources such as psychologists, good friends, spouses, children, and seminars have to be utilized. The key is being open and willing to listen. You will also learn humility. While it may feel like a monumental task, there is no greater freedom than living in awareness. Once you are in control of the narrative, it is important to ask – how do you want to live the story of your life?