



## Clear Thinking Issue 114

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### How well do you know yourself?

– by *Mark Tyrrell*

If you are ignorant, or deluding yourself, about what you are really like you will be held back in your development as a human being because, in effect, you're working blind. You can't really get somewhere unless you have a good idea where you are at the moment.

Where are you starting from?

#### **The trap of self delusion**

So firstly, I'm sure we all kid ourselves sometimes and that's not always such a terrible thing. If we're off on a hot date, it might behoove us to feel convinced we look great, or are in an extra-amusing mood, as thinking like this can help bring about the reality. The average person believes they are 'above average'.

But, in the round, I'd say that honest self understanding is both necessary and hugely valuable if individuals, communities and perhaps even the whole human race are to develop further in a fruitful and positive way.

Think about this. Do you ever perplex yourself or find yourself asking '*Why on earth did I do that?*' Have you ever noticed how people seem to have very different perceptions of themselves compared to how others view them? Low self esteem is so often a lack of genuine self understanding – I'm thinking of Hans Christian Anderson's ugly duckling here.

One of the biggest mistakes we – that’s ‘we’ as in ‘you and I’, specifically – make is to assume that it’s only *other* people who are susceptible to self deception.

I’ve mentioned low self esteem, but some people seem to think they are much *better* people than they really are in some ways. We might call them unconscious hypocrites, like Professor Higgins in George Bernard Shaw’s play *Pygmalion*, which you may be more familiar with in its movie version *My Fair Lady*. Professor Higgins *genuinely* feels he is a fair minded, decent and charitable chap, even though his actual behavior conflicts so markedly with this perception of himself. Things only begin to genuinely improve for him when he starts to look at himself straight, so to speak.

Why is it important for us to not be too self deluded? Well, for one thing, research shows us that people whose ‘conscious’ and ‘unconscious’ motivations are aligned – i.e. what they say matches up with what they do – are happier and healthier than their less self knowledgeable peers. Having a more balanced and objective take on yourself can make you happier and more effective in pursuing your goals.

But *how* do you get to understand yourself a little better?

## **‘Finding’ yourself**

I sometimes find it amusing to hear people talk about needing to ‘find themselves’, as if they’ve mislaid their identity down the back of the couch and might find it under a cushion next to the remote control. We all use such words and phrases, forgetting that perhaps they originally had a coherent, structured and intelligent application behind them.

And maybe you’ve noticed that sometimes people use the phrase ‘I need to find myself’ as an excuse to get out of a relationship, or as justification for going on that fun round the world trip. If they are using the idea of increasing self knowledge as a cover for their *real motives*, what they really need is more objectivity about their own behavioral drivers.

“I want to end this relationship because I want to be free to date other people” doesn’t reflect as well on us as asserting that “I want to get to know myself better”, but if it is the *real truth* of the matter then *admitting* it will actually bring us closer to knowing or ‘finding’ ourselves. Genuine humility and increased self awareness go hand in hand, in my view.

Finding ourselves isn’t about self indulgent trips to ashrams while neglecting our families back home, or about having lots of exciting adventures. It’s more to do with calm self observation in your life *as it is*. This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t change our lives, but self understanding doesn’t come about from running away or being self

indulgent and calling itself development. If you *are* running away or being self indulgent, then recognize and name it as such.

And there's the rub. How do we know what our own motives truly are?

## **Motivation misattribution**

For a start, much of our behavior is driven by unconscious processes. It's been estimated that every second our five senses take in *eleven million* pieces of information. We know this because scientists have counted the number of receptor cells on each sense organ and the nerves that go from these cells to the brain. However, we can only *consciously process* about *forty* bits of information a second. So large parts of our experience are *unavoidably* unknowable to us as far as conscious awareness is concerned.

The sort of psychotherapy that tries to 'make everything conscious' misses the point that large parts of ourselves *need* to be unknowable and out of sight. We don't need to be conscious of *every* subliminal causal factor behind our behavior. But sometimes it really does matter to know that what's influencing you is not what you think it is.

People often completely misattribute their own actions and behavior. A friend of mine was once about to give a speech. Normally, he would have been very relaxed about this. I was there at the time, and he told me he felt rather sick and his heart was racing and so he concluded that he must be really nervous. Later, he discovered he had food poisoning, but he'd attributed what was really the effects of a bad meal to anxiety about his speech.

There is a classic experiment in which men were sent (one at a time) across a high rope bridge. On the way over, they would encounter a woman, who would stop and talk to them. The men who went over the bridge reported feeling much more attracted to the woman they met than a control group who encountered the woman in 'ordinary' surroundings. The men misattributed their sweaty palms and quickened heart rates to the effect of meeting the woman, and so believed they were finding her attractive – whereas in fact these signs of physical arousal were due to the perceived physical danger they were in.

So there's a tip. If you want someone to find you more attractive, take them on a roller coaster ☺. They are unlikely to turn to you after the ride and say: "70% of my arousal is due to the ride and only 30% to my attraction to you!" Unless we review ourselves carefully when we have stronger than expected reactions to things, we'll be taken along by the current of our *prevailing emotionality* and not see the real causes of things.

We can quite successfully deceive ourselves through regularly incorrectly attributing one thing to another. I remember a client telling me she had had a long distance

relationship with a man that she'd found exciting. It was only when it stopped being long distance that she discovered that it was the *distance* between them and not the *man* that she had found exciting.

Then again, if we are paid to do something we enjoy doing anyway, we may come to wrongly conclude that our prime motivation for doing it is the money; whereas that might not actually be the case. These are all everyday ways in which we can be mistaken about what truly motivates us.

If people enjoy the praise, positive approval and social sanction they get from raising money for charity but don't recognize how important this praise is to their motivation for doing these good works, believing themselves *wholly* focused on relieving suffering, then they understand themselves less than they might. Would they still be as motivated if there was absolutely no way of knowing that they were helping? If I know why I am helping and realize that, at least in part, it's for glory or praise, then I can, at least, be a little less self righteous or self important about my role. That last idea isn't such a popular one, not surprisingly, but it does reflect what people actually do.

## **Tolerating uncertainty**

One way to know ourselves better is to get better at tolerating our own uncertainty about what lies behind our behavior. For example, if I blush when I'm talking to someone, this response may take me by surprise as much as the person I'm talking with.

I didn't know I was going to blush, but it happened. Maybe below my conscious awareness this person reminded me of someone I was attracted to at school. However, if, as is likely, I'm unaware of this, I might rationalize and come up with a reason to explain my red face. I might tell myself I blushed because I felt they were being a little rude in how they were speaking to me. Now I've made up a theory that takes me *away* from true self knowledge. But if I relax with not knowing, and don't immediately look for an 'explanation', I give my unconscious mind a chance to produce its own reason – which, generally, will be more accurate.

It might go like this. After the blushing incident I might say to myself: "Hmm, that was interesting! I wonder why I blushed? I don't usually! There must be some reason!" Perhaps later in the day, when I'm not consciously thinking about it, my unconscious mind will produce an image of that girl I was attracted to in high school all those years ago, and I see the match between the woman I'd been talking to today and the girl I was too shy to speak to at fifteen.

So hold back. Don't jump to conclusions or theories about your own responses too quickly, especially when they strike you as unusual.

It's often said that to really understand someone's motivations you need to watch what they *do* and not just listen to what they *say*. If someone repeatedly tells you they love you, but also regularly treats you badly, then what should you believe – their words or their actions? If someone lectures others about the importance of punctuality but is always late themselves... well, it's that repeated tardiness that unlocks the real knowledge as to what they are like.

It's the same when observing yourself.

## **Watch yourself**

Get into the habit of watching your own behavior as objectively as possible – almost as if you were another person. Forget about the image you try to present to others or what you like to think about yourself, even if those things are negative.

We readily assume that we can judge and predict our own behaviors better than non-involved strangers can, but the research doesn't bear this out. In one study, college friends were much more likely to accurately predict the outcome of a romantic relationship than either partner in the couple itself. Even people who didn't know the couple at all could do this just by watching the two partners interact. And two researchers called Nisbett and Wilson found that complete strangers can often make more accurate predictions as to how we'll react to something than we can ourselves.

I think the explanation for this is that we all have good reasons to find justifications for what we do, and over time we build up quite a complex set of theories about ourselves, whereas a stranger doesn't have all that baggage. Outside observers can often plainly see an attraction growing between two people before the individuals themselves become aware of it themselves. We can deny, manipulate, undervalue or overvalue our talents, attributes and motivations – but strangers can see us more directly. One step to self knowledge is to start to put aside our own 'theories' about ourselves and just watch our *actions*. What do we actually *do*? I've worked with people who have described themselves as weak and cowardly, yet I've *observed* them do the strongest and bravest of things.

I've had clients tell me they have all these plans and intentions and how incredibly ambitious they are, but then never actually seem to *do* anything. Do your *actions* fit your stated notions about yourself? Don't judge, just watch for a while.

If we want our conscious ideas to be aligned with our unconscious selves we might need to change our behavior. I am always going to feel uncomfortable somewhere inside if I talk about the 'value of hard work' but don't actually work hard very often myself. There will be a mismatch between my conscious motivation, my idealized notion

of myself, and my unconscious motivation – my ‘bone idleness’. Yet if I’m not consciously *aware* of this mismatch, I’ll just *feel uncomfortable*.

Psychologists call this kind of disconnect between conscious and unconscious motivation ‘cognitive dissonance’. To assuage this discomfort I can either lie to myself – thereby moving yet another step *away* from self knowledge – by making excuses for my laziness and believing them, or I can change my behavior and actually start to work harder, thereby bringing my conscious standards into satisfying alignment with my behavior.

But to do this I have to at least acknowledge to myself that I’m capable of kidding myself about myself.

(Ahem! You might need to re-read that a few times, but I assure you it *does* make sense ☺ )

## Updating your perceptions

Next, you need to be prepared to update your ideas about yourself. I have been playing the guitar for a few years but still had the idea that ‘I’m not at all musical’. It came as a shock to me when someone else described me as a musical person. Much psychotherapy has to do with helping people update their awareness of the positive developments that have taken place within themselves and integrate them into a wider self perception.

People can label themselves as shy, or non-academic, or lazy and, even after they’ve exhibited years of the converse behavior, *still* see themselves in these ways because that’s how they have been labeled. Knowing yourself is also about being willing to see *your changing self*, not just in different contexts in life, but also over longer periods of time.

Another aspect to knowing yourself is to understand that much of our behavior has been drilled into us and has become automatic and conditioned. But if we don’t *recognize* the automatic aspects of these behaviors we can start to make up all kinds of fake explanations for them. I once met a man to whom I took an instant dislike. At first I made up all kinds of reasons why I didn’t take to him, but deep down I knew I hadn’t given him a chance.

I realized I was being neither fair nor honest, and began to question why I had *automatically* taken a prejudiced view. After a while it dawned on me that superficially he reminded me of someone I had genuinely disliked from years before. When I got to know this new person by getting around the automatic unconscious associations, I found that I *did* like him. We can all go around *believing* we are not prejudiced while we in effect *behave* in quite noticeably prejudiced ways. Part of getting to know yourself is

to accept the possibility that you may be reacting with prejudice to a situation or person – prejudice that has been conditioned into you. Realizing this is the first step to overcoming it.

## Conclusion

A marker for good mental and social health is *not* always thinking about yourself and your motivations. One of the strongest indicators that therapy is no longer necessary for someone is when I start to notice that they are less interested in talking about their own emotional ebbs and flows, or even their own life in general. The analysis paralysis brought on by too much navel gazing is not what the journey to self knowledge is about!

So in summary, we can come to understand ourselves better by:

- understanding that we don't have immediate conscious access to all our motivations
- realizing that it's easy to make up reasons that flatter us or fit a preconceived pattern of low or high self esteem but that don't actually match up with the truth
- accepting that we might be responding automatically to a new person or situation simply because of a superficial resemblance to a previous person or time
- refraining from jumping to conclusions about our own actions, motivations and responses
- watching ourselves as calmly and objectively as possible, focusing on what we *do*, not just on what we tell ourselves and other people.

## How to lift depression quickly online course

Misattribution is the plague of the depressed.

*"I'm depressed because I don't know who I am."*

*"I'm depressed because our family is genetically prone to depression."*

*"I'm depressed because there is a chemical imbalance in my brain."*

*"I'm depressed because so many bad things have happened to me."*

Knowing what *really* sets depression going and keeps it going and knowing how to effectively interrupt that process and bring people out of depression is the focus of our unique [How to lift depression quickly online course](#).

We aim to ensure that therapists (and their clients) will quickly stop misattributing depression and work effectively together to break out of the patterns that hold depression in place. And make sure that they never come back.

Our next [How to lift depression quickly online course](#) is starting on Wednesday 15 March, so don't put off signing up a moment longer! There are only 25 places on each course, so we can ensure all delegates get maximum personal attention from our experienced tutors.

Read more about the [How to lift depression quickly online course here](#).

See you in a fortnight.

Mark Tyrrell  
Co-Founder  
Uncommon Knowledge  
Psychology trainers since 1995

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